

A Spark can Become Fire

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Summary: Alice Academy, a school where those with strange and unexplainable abilities the government called Alices were thrown into. Marco was just enrolled there to his chagrin, but he finds the perfect escape plan on a one week away prize given to the best students of each year. Things aren't so easy, though, and his problems- and maybe his salvation -begin when he bumps into a weird boy.

1. Chapter 1

A/N: Hi there! So, I'm back with my entry for the 2016 Big Bang. I posted this story on AO3 on the 8th, my posting date, but didn't have time to upload it here until now.

This story is a Gakuen Alice AU, but no prior knowledge about the story is needed for anything to be understood. This is also a birthday gift for my dear friend shockandlock, who likes High School AUs and fantasy, and thus came the idea to make this sort of crossover.

Art by nounoursonne to go with the fic, and if you can, go like and reblog it on tumblr to show support :D (inviting-nonsenseworld. tumblr post/142490129162/art-submitted-by-nounoursonne-for-the-2016-big). Thanks a lot to phoenix0725 for betareading so quickly for me, and to imperialmint for holding this wonderful event once again this year.

I guess that's it. Hope you enjoy it :)

* * *

><p>It was going to rain.<p>

The gray clouds that had been gathering for a while were darkening and Marco recognized the heady smell that foretold it in the air. It was earthy and brought forth images from his most recent home — the grassy backyard, the vegetable garden, still no more than buried seeds marked with stakes, their subconscious flocking on the small living room and the pitter patter from the window mixing with soft chatter. It was a nice home; Marco liked it there.

There was a soft ruffle of clothes to his right, and it was a harsh reminder that he had already crossed the gates, a definite sign he was the farthest he'd get from home and wasn't going back.

Marco sighed, and, as his mood soured, he wished the rain would come down hard and relentlessly, so maybe then he'd feel he fit his surroundings. It didn't, and he was left staring at the clouds through the car window until they stopped in front of a building.

Teacher Hina, as she had introduced herself, told him to wait as she got out and talked with someone. The person was fidgeting, sending non-discreet looks to the car until Hina snapped at them and they hurried inside the building.

"Get your bag and come," Hina said as she opened the car door. "You have to sign a paper before Hina takes you to the dormitories. Don't worry about your luggage. Someone is coming to get it."

Marco followed her inside the building without a word, going through a sitting room and down a few corridors. The walls of the corridors were a pale orange, the kind that looking at too long was sure to give him a headache, so he was glad when they entered a room and the color switched to beige. Marco took a quick look around as Hina talked to a woman behind a desk, and he stopped when his eyes were met with his own reflection at the edge of a window - ruffled hair and heavy eye bags greeted him, but the sight of his ear ornament was what earned a frown.

A clearing of throat took Marco's attention away, and he saw teacher Hina looking at him with a raised eyebrow, the woman she had been talking with staring at him from behind her.

"Here." She motioned him closer and showed him a stack of papers. "You have to sign here and here."

Marco's hand moved on autopilot, displeasure prickling under his skin, and he quickly read the content before signing his name and returning it. There was nothing there he hadn't been told before.

Hina looked over the paper before giving it to the woman and giving him a nod.

"You start classes tomorrow. Your schedule will be inside your room, along with the needed books and other necessities for your studies. Hina advises you to arrive to class early and find your homeroom teacher. They should be able to evaluate your position regarding the class and explain anything you need to know about other classes, so don't forget to ask. Do you understand?"

"...Yes."

"Good. You'll get used to this place soon, don't worry."

_They all do _, was left hanging in the air.

Hina left the room and went down the sickening orange corridor, and Marco sighed before following, not giving the remaining person there a single look despite feeling their curious gaze on the back of his head.

The way back outside was spent in silence. Marco used the time to memorize some of the layout of the floor and any important rooms he came across, but unfortunately there were only closed doors around them. Hina didn't bother watching him, and he wondered how certain of themselves people in this institution were.

The good side of losing so much time inside the building came as a surprise â€" it was raining when they crossed the glass doors leading outside. Marco took a deep breath, the pleasant smell soothing his tense nerves a bit, and he gave in to the chance to connect with his Alice's senses and just hear.

It only took a second before he noticed it.

A crash, wood hitting wood, then hurried footsteps followed by others until there was another noise, something made of metal falling to the ground. Astounded, Marco's head whirled back, but he couldn't see anything out of normal through the glass door.

"Is something wrong?" Teacher Hina asked, her voice louder than usual, and Marco didn't know what to answer.

Another crash and shouting - complaints about someone?

Marco tensed when the footsteps grew closer, and as Hina seemed to notice the problem, her high heels clicking on the floor when she turned to head inside, the source of the mess made itself known.

The glass doors were thrown open with a sharp noise that made Marco wince, and before he knew it, he was a second away from colliding with someone. He jumped back instinctively, and yet their shoulders bumped against each other, throwing them both off balance and onto the wet ground, unprotected by the ledge of the building.

Marco's eyes snapped open and he saw a boy about his height lying on the ground next to him. The boy groaned, hand going to his head and massaging a spot between dark strands of hair, then jolted and threw Marco a heated glare. Marco stared at him in surprise, only then noticing he had a red and white fox mask covering his whole face.

"Damn. Shit," the boy whispered, glancing back at Hina, and only then did Marco notice her leaning against the building wall as unbalanced as they had been.

A frown formed on her face, but before she could open her mouth, the boy was up and running away through the heavy rain.

"Portgas D. Ace!"

Her shout was ignored.

"That boyâ€¦" Hina huffed, and straightened up. "Well then. Hina will show you to your dormitory. It's on the other side of the campus."

And that was that. Nothing else was going to be mentioned about that incident, judging by her tone.

Marco stored the incident inside his head and followed Hina to a smaller car waiting for them. He glanced at the building - the first view of Alice Academy he had had so far. The words 'National Alice Academy Headquarters' were on the wall in shiny golden letters, and it'd have transmitted importance, even power, if it wasn't for the two slight indents on the 'A' in 'Alice'. With the constant raindrops falling, it made the letter look like it was crying, as if it was deeply sad, and gave the whole picture a mocking tone.

Bitter too, Marco realized, and his mouth curled down before he forced it look neutral again.

The walk to the other side of the campus took around twenty minutes, and gave Marco a much better idea of his surroundings. They passed by what looked like a village, then by some bigger and more distant buildings until finally stopping at the entry of a two-story building. The outer walls were a soft cream and the roof had bright red tiles.

Hina gave him his room key and its number and, without getting out of the car, wished him a good night and a nice start of classes. Marco observed as the car drove away before he entered the dorm.

The place had a serene atmosphere that brought about a nice sense of peace, and he felt some of the tension dissipate from his body whilst he searched for his room.

He found it on the second floor on the right side, and after he closed the door behind himself, he felt his shoulders droop with exhaustion. A quick look around showed the place was very simple, with only a bed, a bedside table, a writing desk with a chair, and a wardrobe - by which his luggage was located. Everything was already organized, and he didn't doubt he'd find his uniform and even bedspreads and sheets kept somewhere.

Students were supplied with all that was needed for the best environment for them to study and live. Alice Academy students were called geniuses, and the school was prestigious, so good quality was to be expected.

Marco snorted. There was some truth in the middle of the good but naive comments about the academy he had heard.

It was with a tired sigh that Marco dragged his feet from the door to his bed. He snuggled his face into his pillow, the unfamiliar smell unpleasant for his sensible nose, and squeezed his eyes shut. It was very soft, at least.

Ignoring his slightly rumbling stomach and deciding he could organize his belongings later, he kicked off his shoes and fidgeted until he found a comfortable position.

He was out like a light.

* * *

><p>Later became next morning without Marco realizing. When he woke up, it was to the soft sound of chirping, and one groggy look at the bedside table clock showed it was 7:42 AM.<p>

Marco sat up in a flash, all traces of sleepiness gone as he stared in disbelief at the clock. He glanced at the window a bit to the left of his bed, and sure enough, sunlight was streaming through the open curtains.

"Why me?" He groaned, then grimaced at the disgusting taste in his mouth. Right, he hadn't brushed his teeth or changed his clothes, and a quick look down showed they were quite rumpled. That's what he got for giving in to tiredness. Such a silly and careless mistake, and now he had less than an hour before the first class started. Wasn't he supposed to talk to a teacher before that? Just brilliant.

Marco hurried through making his bed and taking a shower, then found his schedule on the writing desk and threw a notebook, two books, and a pencil case inside the brand new school bag sitting on the chair. He skipped unpacking and went to the big wooden wardrobe, finding it empty except for his newest uniform - pants, ties, short-sleeved and long-sleeved shirts folded in small piles, a blazer on a hanger, and two pairs of brown boots on the ground beside the wardrobe. It was June, so the summer uniform it was.

Marco was ready to get out after five minutes, but as he got the keys to his room, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror on one of the wardrobe doors he'd left open and stared.

The academy had done a good job in choosing the right size of clothes and shoes for him. They fit well on his body, and with the school bag he carried they gave Marco the look of a student for the first time in years. A small glinting brought his attention to his earring ornament - it should've been the oddball in the picture, but instead it fit well with his new look.

Marco clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. In a second, he was out of the room, door banging close after him and key annoyingly not finding the keyhole. Marco held his hand with the other, and the trembling lessened enough for him to lock the door, then he was dashing down the corridor and outside.

He only stopped when the sun rays touched his face. It was a beautiful day with a gentle breeze and no sign of the storm from the night before, and idle chatter as well as soft chirping reached his ears. Some students passed by him, one yawning and the other talking, and the normalcy of it made Marco's stomach clench.

This wasn't Marco's life â€" he shouldn't be here.

Yet, here he was. Found, and now locked inside the Academy for years to come.

All of a sudden, both the urgent need to arrive on time and his frustration vanished, and gave way to tiredness.

He continued the walk to the High School Building at a slow pace.

Most of the students on the cobblestone path were from high school, if the orange and brown checkered pants were any indication, but there was a flash of blue - and even an unique red - here and there. There were no signs of Alices being used anywhere, and Marco wondered if there was a rule about that.

His first contact with an Alice inside the Academy came as soon as he stepped inside the high school building. A strange soft buzz met his ears, and he stopped just in time for a blur to pass in front of him and disappear down the corridor. At once, the pitch of the conversations surrounding him grew as more people talked all at once, and Marco had to jump aside to make way for someone who was running at a normal speed in the direction the blur had gone.

"Did you see who it was?!"

"No, I didn't."

"Damn it."

"We were so close this time!"

Marco stared as the subject of the conversations shifted to the passing blur - or to what seemed to have been a girl. Some people crowded together in the hall while others went after the blur.

Amusement hit Marco seconds after realization.

"So that was a speed Alice, huh?"

"You saw who it was?!"

Marco started at the exclamation. Behind him, a boy around his age gaped at him, and suddenly there were many pairs of eyes staring at him.

"I-What? Sorry?"

"Did you see who was running?"

"No. They have blond hair, thoughâ€¦"

"Damn, we already know that. False alarm," the boy sighed, and Marco watched with caution as the other people's attention diverted from him.

"Hey, excuse me, but what was that?" Marco asked the boy, who was already walking away with a sullen expression.

"Hm? That?" Without waiting for an answer, the boy continued. "Well, you can't blame people for being excited at the possibility of the answer to the bet."

"Bet?"

"Oh!" The boy exclaimed before he squinted his eyes. The skin around his eyes wrinkled, and Marco noticed there was a half-moon scar surrounding his left one. "You're not in. Poor fella, but you can still participate, if you want. I'm the one organizing them, so just tell me your guess and price, and you're in."

"Ah, thanks, but I'm good."

The boy shrugged. "Too bad. Acceleration Alice on Monday is winning so far, and I think it's also right."

"So you're trying to guess their Alice?" Yes, Marco was definitely amused. These were Alice Academy's students, then.

"Oh, no, we're trying to guess the person. You're really out of the loop, huh? There are two girls, one with Speed and the other with Acceleration, and they always test their abilities running around. The betting part comes because they have time and day agreements on whose reign over the corridors it is. So there'll be no accidents, you know - there've been a few of those."

The guy closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head, and it'd be the perfect picture of disappointment if Marco didn't see the slight upwards twitch of his lips. "There are bets going around to discover who and when. If only Izo would help me, I could get that prize, but he's a spoilsport. What use is super vision when you don't use it for the good stuff?"

"Ah." Marco nodded. The boy shook his head again, then mumbled another complaint and walked away. Marco made a split second decision to follow.

"There are no other Alices you can use to find out?" He asked, waiting patiently as the look of surprise he received changed into a pleased one. Marco listened as the boy talked about how it became a game for the girls and how they made it harder for the rest of them, then about the diverse abilities people had used to try to discover the truth. So far, even teleportation and telekinesis were of no use - and they even had good plans, according to him.

Marco felt a smile tug at his lips at the enthusiasm the boy showed, taking him as the talkative and genuine type.

Talkative about Alices, so very common here, but a reason to leave Marco agitated. That's how it was one week ago, at least, and now it was suddenly the most common thing. It was part of anyone's daily life here, Marco's included.

He pressed his lips into a thin line. Worse than talking so openly about Alices was using them, but one quick look to the side gave him his second and third contact with other Alices: there was someone walking on thin air and another person with color-changing hair.

Normal? No, it was freaky. Alices weren't nice things, weren't cute powers that made those who had them look like heroes. They were attention-calling, and one thing the world had to spare was self-serving people.

After all, Alices made for beautiful aberrations and nice selling

products.

Marco avoided the urge to fiddle with his tie, and instead closed a hand on the strap of his school bag. This was his reality for now, where it was safe to be an Alice and everyone he interacted with had one. _Of course _it wasn't weird to talk about them.

"I haven't seen you around before, have I? I don't think so." Right, Marco wasn't alone. The boy beside him narrowed his eyes and made a show of looking Marco up and down. "Transferred from a special class? Or are you a first year? A very late first year, but I won't judge."

"No, I just got enrolled here."

"Huh?"

There was a moment of awkward silence as the boy stared at Marco in astonishment.

"Y-You're kidding, right?"

"Why would I?"

"But that's not impossible, since you're here," the boy finished in a murmur, something akin to wonder appearing in his eyes. "Whoa, now that's rare. I've never heard about something like this happening before."

"What?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm being rude here. I'm Thatch, second year."

"Marco." Marco nodded. "Same year."

"Pleased to meet ya." Thatch gave him a big grin, and Marco felt himself mirroring him, albeit with much less enthusiasm. "Just a piece of advice: rumors fly quickly over here. You're a rarity, so be prepared in case you find yourself in the center of attention soon."

"A rarity?" Marco snorted " of course he'd still stand out, even in a school for Alices.

"Yeah. I mean, I was brought here when I was thirteen, so it's been, what, around four years? And I'm still told I'm a newbie by some."

"That's not|" Marco blinked in surprise. "Crazy."

"I guess." Thatch shrugged. "I'm more curious about how you made it. I mean, what's your Alice if you can hide it so well?"

"Ah|"

There was another moment of silence before Thatch shook his head. "Let's leave that story to another time, then. I bet I can discover your Alice in a week!"

"I bet you can't," Marco replied, tension vanishing, and he allowed a smile onto his face. Thatch didn't seem like a bad person. "By the way, how do I get to this classroom?" He showed Thatch the paper with his schedule.

"Ohho, you're also in class A. Of course I can find some clues on your ability if I'm in the same class." Thatch smirked before it wavered. "Damn, but you're in the Somatic ability class. Well, at least it's already one clue."

"Wait, Somatic?"

"You don't know about that? Man, I can't believe they didn't explain. I guess it's better to explain in class 'cause I'll have more examples to show you." Thatch gave him a thumbs up, to which Marco nodded in thanks. "Geez, I don't know why I didn't see you're new at once."

Marco rose an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"Your uniform is impeccable, that's a given. Sort of obvious, now that I'm paying attention."

Marco's eyes flickered between his and Thatch's uniform, and the difference in their state was clear if you cared enough to look. The orange from Thatch's pants, the green from his necktie, even the brown from the boots - they were all worn down, the colors more faded out than the ones in Marco's.

"I guess..."

"See? It's a big plaque screaming 'new guy!'"

"A big plaque you didn't see before," Marco rebuked. It was easy enough to interact with Thatch. If they ended up seeing each other often because of classes, he might turn out to be good company. "Maybe I should find a way to fix that."

"I can find someone to help with that."

"It's a deal."

"Hey, what's my part?"

"I can help you discover who's running around. I have very good eyesight."

"Marco, I think this is the start of a very good friendship."

Marco let a soft chuckle escape his lips. His mood felt lighter as Thatch guided him to their class, and the churning in his stomach stopped.

Maybe he could deal with this. Maybe he could adapt to the normalcy of Alices.

At least, until he found a way out.

* * *

><p>Marco had forgotten breakfast. He regretted it the second his stomach started complaining minutes after Thatch guided him to their classroom, and remembered he also hadn't eaten dinner. It was going to be a long morning.<p>

"The class isn't very big, so you'll end up knowing everyone here in A soon. People from B too. We do some group projects with them," Thatch explained as they entered a classroom near the end of the corridor on the second floor. There was nothing out of ordinary about it.

A few sleepy good mornings were exchanged, but otherwise no one paid them much attention. They walked to the back and took seats in the last row " instead of separate tables, there were eight long wood ones, four on each side, with some seats, and they were almost all empty. Marco wondered if he was mistaken in being late or if there really were so few people in the class.

"There are only two second year classes?"

"There's three. You probably already know, but there aren't that many Alices out there, so there's far less students than at normal schools. You end up knowing a lot of people from all grades after a while, even if you don't talk with most."

Marco hummed in understanding - his stomach rumbled in unison. Thatch didn't seem to notice, occupied in searching for something inside his bag, and Marco entertained the thought of asking him where he could get a snack.

Instead, he asked, "So, what is that Somatic class?"

"It's pretty simple. There are four ability class categories: Latent, Technical, Somatic, and Special. Alices are divided into them according to what their power does or how it manifests, and every Friday and some other random times during the week you spend the whole day with your ability class."

"Doing what?"

"Training." Thatch shrugged. "Doing projects. Lazing around. It depends on what your class is, who your teacher is, and even what day it is. If it's close to a festival or an event, there's a bigger chance of you doing more stuff. Can't say how Somatic works because I'm in Technical, but you guys are always doing something."

"I see" | "

There was a class with the sole purpose of Alice training; Marco should've expected that. Having someone to help with his Alice " now that was a strange thought. Pops had always been the one to do that, even if his Alice was as different from Marco's as possible.

He started drumming his index and middle finger on the table.

"Hey," Thatch called, and Marco stopped. "About your Alice" | "

Marco gave him a lopsided smile. "Weren't you going to guess it?"

"I am, but I'm curious. You're being all secretive," Thatch defended himself. "Not even a clue?"

"I'm in the Somatic class." Marco chuckled at Thatch's indignant look. "What sort of abilities are in the Somatic, by the way?"

"Oh, they're the type that manifest physically on the person. Pheromones, enhancers, part-transformation in animals â€" anything of the sort, really, so that clue is very vague."

"What about the other types?"

"A clue for information," Thatch declared with a smile.

"Alright." Marco rolled his eyes. "Mine has nothing to do with pheromones."

"And you have good eyesight, huh? Okay. The other types then. The Technical one has Alices that appear when their user performs a specific action. Mine is the Cooking Alice, so whenever I cook, something is created â€" besides food, I mean, and it's a pain controlling that. There's the Construction Alice, Chemist Alice, any others connected to technology and creation."

"What aboutâ€"|" Marco hesitated, Whitebeard's power flashing inside his mind. He was curious, though. "A quake Alice? Like, one that can shake things and the ground near."

"â€"|"That's very specific. I guess it'd be in Special. It's where the Alices that don't fit Somatic, Technical, or Latent go. It's a big mess of abilities, but they're an interesting group. Their teacher is very weird, though." Thatch put a hand at the side of his mouth, and said in a whisper. "I hear he controls shadows, and he uses it to play tricks on the students. Kinda lazy too, so I think those from Special ask another teacher help in training." He straightened before continuing. "Then there's the Latent type, which encompasses all sorts of ESP abilities and others connected to elements."

"Like fire, waterâ€"|"

"Lightning, ice, and wind too. There are quite a few. And that was your lesson on ability classes â€" a clue is required as payment."

Thatch grinned in a carefree manner, but Marco took longer to smile back this time. This exchange was nothing but friendly, but it was getting too personal all of a sudden.

"I'm sure my Alice is very unique, but maybe you know some similar but simpler."

"Still awfully vague," Thatch mumbled and shook his head. "How the hell did you hide for so long?"

"I wasn't alone." Marco shrugged.

He knew it was too simple an answer for Thatch's question, but it was the truth. Alone, he would have been caught long ago, maybe on that one very disastrous night when he was six.

Which brought forth the thought: did the Academy bring children so young here?

The different colored uniforms came to his mind. He saw someone wearing red today, and weren't they younger than the others? Marco tried remembering their face, but he didn't pay them attention enough for it to be clear.

His fingers started drumming again.

"I'm going outside."

"Huh? But class is going to start soon," Thatch said, but Marco was already up and sliding down the seats to the side.

"I was supposed to find the teacher before it begins." The answer was out of his mouth without much thought, but then he realized it was true. He had forgotten about it, and the clock showed the class was to start in five minutes.

The realization that he had no idea where to go came to his mind when he was in the corridor, two doors down from his classroom. Only a few students walked around, and they soon found their way through a door nowhere near Marco.

Marco pressed the bridge of his nose with a sigh. Getting restless over things wasn't going to help; he should know better than to give in to his urge to wander. He went back until he was close to his classroom door, and leaned against the opposite wall, resigned to waiting for the teacher there.

Marco closed his eyes, and activated his Alice's hearing as much as he dared without risking transforming. Barely audible and muffled sounds became acute — a cough from behind the wall, mingled conversations, a door creaking as it closed, a clap for attention, a small bird chirping on the tree by the window. No footsteps approaching.

Marco relaxed as the time passed. He was sure it was time for class to start, but he knew there was no teacher inside 2-A, so he waited.

He was startled into attention when there was a sudden screeching. His eyes snapped open, and he glanced to the right. On the corridor end, there was an Emergency Exit sign beside a blue door, and a strange thump followed by footsteps seemed to come from there.

Then came a shout.

"You damn snake, stop it!"

Marco moved closer in curiosity, but had to step away as the door slammed open, and out and unto the ground came a boy. He groaned in pain and moved to stand up, and just as Marco was going to offer help, something long dashed from behind him and dived straight into Marco's chest with enough strength to send him tottering back. His arms closed around something cold and slippery, but he managed to find a stable enough place to hold it long enough for it to stop struggling.

"Got you," Marco murmured, satisfied though he didn't know what it was. A squirming brought his attention to what he had caught, only for him freeze in astonishment when he found a pair of slitted eyes staring at him from up close.

Covering a good part of his lap and an even larger part of the ground was an actual snake - a surprisingly big one that had what seemed like a blue mane, a strange half-a-skull-with-horns hat and a navy ascot tie - and yet, what seemed weirder about the picture was the small wooden box in its mouth. It blinked a few times, and Marco didn't know what to do except to blink back.

Then, it tried to escape from him and he remembered the earlier shout.

"That's not yours, is it?" Marco said, despite knowing it wouldn't understand him. Then again, it was wearing a hat and a tie, so why not?

The snake hissed, its tongue slipping out to flick Marco's nose, and it seemed annoyed though the sound was muffled.

"Salomeâ€¦ Youâ€¦ Stupid snakeâ€¦ Give it back!"

The boy appeared in his field of vision, kneeling in front of Marco, holding his arms out, and cutting off Salome's other exit, panting and glaring fiercely.

"I get itâ€¦ alright? I'll talkâ€¦ to Hancock about it, so give it back!"

Despite the fact that it shouldn't have been possible, the snake nodded smugly and dropped the box into the boy's hand. It gave Marco a swift look before sliding out back in the direction it came from, opening the emergency exit door with no problem and letting it slam close behind it.

"Godammit, Salome, there's a deep scratch now," the boy grumbled, turning the box from one side to the other. He took a deep breath and sighed. He sounded as tired as he looked. "Thank you for the help."

"It's okay," Marco answered, getting up and offering a hand to him. The boy accepted, and they were left in almost silence as the boy turned the box around, something clanking softly inside, and murmured something to himself. Marco still picked it up â€" it was another complaint about the bad treatment Salome had given it â€" but stopped his Alice right after in order to avoid overhearing something personal.

Marco decided against asking what had happened after noticing the boy's frustration, and then something pulled at his memory.

There was something familiar about this boy. It couldn't be, but just maybe...

"You're the guy with the fox mask from yesterday, aren't you?" Marco asked.

The boy's expression became confused before it closed off, mouth

curling down and eyebrows furrowing. "That was you? Well, thanks a fucking lot for yesterday."

Well, that answered Marco's question alright.

"Excuse me? You're the one who bumped into me."

"If you weren't standing right in front of the door like a moron—"

"Oh, I'm sorry I didn't know you were going to come dashing out of nowhere in my direction."

The boy glared at him, and Marco glared right back. What a great turn this had taken.

Before either of them could say anything more, Marco heard footsteps and turned around.

"What are you two doing?"

Walking towards them was a tall blond man with a bonnet. He had a strange purple-blue spiky drawing underneath his right eye, and his mouth was contoured in purple, the same color as his bonnet and the hearts on his white shirt.

"Talking, what else?"

"Skipping class is an option high on the list. You're making it a habit, Ace."

"Hey, I'm having a bad day, okay? I'm not in the mood to sit for hours on end listening to some boring monologue."

Marco saw the man's eyes flicker to Ace's hand clenching around the box before he sighed. "Guess I can't convince you otherwise today. Make sure you show up for my class, though. We're watching a movie."

Of all things, this man was a teacher?

"Excuse me," Marco said, and found himself under the scrutiny of a pair of sharp brown eyes. "Are you going to class 2-A?"

"Yes. And who are you?"

"I'm Marco. Just transferred here."

Ace made a strange strangling sound as the man's eyes widened a bit. Marco straightened at the reactions — perhaps this was what Thatch meant. "I heard about you. I'm your homeroom teacher, Corazon."

"Nice to meet you, sir. I was told I had to talk with you to see my position regarding what I know and what I have to catch up on in the different subjects."

"Right, right. Find me during lunch, and I'll help you."

"Ah—|" Damn it. His stomach grumbled as if on cue, and to Marco's

embarrassment, it made sure to be heard.

"You didn't eat," Corazon huffed.

"No, I was in a hurry this morning," Marco explained.

"Of course you were. Ace, you have geography with Hina, right?" There was a grumble as an answer. "If you're gonna skip it, so why don't you use that time to show your classmate where he can get something to eat?"

Ace gave Corazon a long look, but then sighed and stuck out his hand. "Paper."

Corazon took a notepad and a pen from his back pant pocket, wrote something on it and ripped the first page. "There it is. Only for the first class, though. Smoker is already picking on me."

Ace snorted. "You act lazy all the time, what else did you expect from him?"

"Watch it or I'll take your exemption back."

"You want a favor, then you want to take the thing that allows me to do it? What's the logic?"

"It's not a favor. I'm saying that as your teacher - that's the logic, you brat."

"Whatever," Ace growled at last. "I'm going. Doesn't he need an exemption too?"

Corazon waved a hand dismissively. "I can explain it to the next teacher, but in the meantime I'm the one there. He's going to catch up later, anyway. With your help, of course."

"What?!"

"The hell?! Why me? You just said he's from A!"

"So? You're in the same grade, have similar schedules. I don't see why you can't help. You can be his partner for the next few weeks and show him around. What do you say?"

Ace gaped at Corazon, then let out a string of curses and walked away.

Corazon turned to Marco, who looked at him with discontentment. Nothing against Ace, but it was clear they hadn't had a good start, and Marco could fend for himself. "You should follow him. He's in a terrible mood, so he won't wait. Ace's not a bad person, so it should be good for you two."

For them two. Unnecessary decision explained.

"Rightâ€¦" Marco sighed.

He caught up with Ace and matched his pace. Ace looked thoughtful, so Marco followed in silence. In a way, it was easing not to have to speak â€" Marco didn't like having to introduce himself and go

through the whole introductory questions non-stop, so this was nice.

He took the opportunity to look around and get used to the building, and sooner than he realized, he had bought a snack and was going back to class with just a passing 'bye' from Ace.

* * *

><p>The rest of the day flew by. Most of what was being taught, Marco had already taken a quick look over, so it wouldn't be troublesome to study. He found Corazon during the last class of the day, and got an official paper with the content of each subject for the second year of high school.<p>

Overall, his first day hadn't been awful. Alice Academy was far from what he had expected, which he guessed was his own fault for being too suspicious from what little he knew about the place. Marco didn't deem it trustful, but it wasn't like he planned on staying here until graduation.

It wasn't the time to think about it, though. He needed a good dinner, and time to try to relax in his room before he recharged energy for the next day, so he said goodbye to Thatch and walked out.

"Hey, Marco."

Or not.

"Aren't you going to your ability class?" Corazon asked. He was sitting behind a desk in the front row of the classroom, where he had been since he put a movie and told them to take notes.

"What?"

Marco didn't see anything about an ability class at this time in his schedule, but decided to check at Corazon's insistence. The class wasn't big, as Thatch said, so when he looked up it was no surprise to see no one but himself and Corazon there.

"You mean this blank space?"

"Yeah. You're supposed to fill it according to how much you plan on going. One hour per day and all of Friday is the recommended time."

"Every day for the _whole _week?"

"Not Saturdays and Sundays."

Marco sighed. There went the free time he was planning on enjoying. "Where do I need to go?"

"The classrooms are in the Elementary school building, but where exactly depends."

"Would you happen to know where the Somatic one is?"

Corazon's eyebrows shot up before he smiled. "Somatic, huh? Then welcome to the group. I'm the teacher responsible there sometimes, but I can't go today. Getting to know your classmates will be good, though. The classroom we use is to the left of the building, but there's an entrance from the outside if you prefer. There's a sign there, it'll be easy to find it."

"Alright, thank you."

Marco watched as Corazon flashed him a thumbs up and gathered the papers he had been organizing during the movie.

"Now go so you'll catch some of them there."

Then Corazon tripped on thin air and fell with a dull thud, his fluffy coat catching fire on his right shoulder. Papers spread in disarray and a lighter clacked to the ground.

"Shit!" Corazon lost his cool in a second. His eyes widened, and he patted his coat frantically, but when that did nothing he threw it to the ground and tried to stomp on it. "It's okay! Don't mind me, just go."

Marco hesitated, but Corazon made a quick shooing motion just as the fire grew, so he hurried away.

That wasâ€| unexpected, to say the least. Marco didn't know whether he was more surprised by what happened or by its suddenness. Maybe it had to do with his Alice, and wasn't that an uneasy thought when he remembered Corazon was supposed to instruct him on the control of his powers?

During most of the walk to the elementary school building, some twenty minutes or more, Marco had time to think of what sort of class the Somatic ability was. Pheromones, partial transformations â€" that didn't say much. His objective wasn't to make friends, but the less chances of antagonism between his classmates and him, the better.

Marco decided to go through the inside door, so he entered the elementary building â€" a grander and more beautiful construction, albeit having the same colors as the high school one - and looked around for the Somatic class.

As Corazon said, it wasn't hard. He followed the corridor on the left for a while before he saw big blue glittery letters spelling 'Somatic' beside double wood doors; underneath it was a silvery plaque with the same word accompanied by 'ability class', all capitalized. Marco lowered his expectations and opened the door, then blinked as several pairs of eyes turned to him.

The classroom was huge. It had long tables organized to the sides with lots of stationary and the most varied supplies where some people seemed to be working on something. On the back, there was a mini stage with red curtains, with two people and a chair, and on its side there were two large white boards full of random words and drawings, but what also seemed like lists. There was a worn green carpet in the middle where some small dumbbells were, a big bounce ball, a ladder, three wooden cubes above which two children sat, and other objects.

Then Marco started noticing the signs of Alices. Both people on stage had animal features — one had dog whiskers and ears that turned a bit when the person's attention diverted from Marco, and the other a pig nose that twitched sometimes and pinkish skin; someone near the ladder jumped to the ceiling and crossed their legs on a metal bar there; a girl sitting on a table had three other girls surrounding her, and when she passed her hand under one of their chins, they started squealing; a boy on the other side of the room had two rabbits on his lap and a cat resting by his feet.

There was so much going on, and at the same time so little. The classroom was far from full, but somehow the ones there seemed to fill the place with expertise. Marco didn't know who he should approach or if it was better to wait and watch.

Thankfully, someone made the decision for him.

"Hi," a young boy said, a cheerful grin on his face that almost hid a scar near his left eye and a flashy straw hat on his head. He wore a blue version of Marco's uniform, but his white shirt was crumpled and he was lacking the blue lace that substituted the tie in middle school's version. In his arms were four cans of paint.

"Hello," Marco answered, a smile of his own appearing.

"You're new," the boy stated. "Where did you come from?"

"I, uh— just enrolled here."

"Cool, so you're really new! My name's Luffy," the boy continued as if Marco hadn't hesitated, and it was a relief that there was a lack of an excessive reaction.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Marco." Marco watched as one of the cans swayed, but somehow didn't fall. "Do you want some help?"

"Nah, I'm fine. But if you wanna paint with us then bring those two big paintbrushes," Luffy said, pointing the nearest table with his chin.

Marco fetched them, and followed Luffy to the other side of the classroom, where a long piece of cloth was spread on the ground. Kneeling to the side was a boy with pitch black hair tied in a bun and plastic gloves stained with a multitude of colors.

"Luffy, did you get the—" The boy interrupted himself when he met Marco's eyes.

"Yup! Brown, blue, green, and orange! And also two new brushes."

"It was supposed to be purple, not orange."

"But orange is so much cooler."

"Orange is actually a warm color," Marco added, and smiled when Luffy turned to him with a baffled look and the other boy chuckled.

"Sorry, but who are you?" The boy asked.

"I'm a new student, Marco."

"Pleasure, I'm Izo. Nice to have new blood here." Izo removed one of his gloves and picked a folded paper from his pant pocket. "Here, this might interest you. They handed these out just before you arrived, but it's the same as every year, so you can have mine."

Marco unfolded the paper with curiosity, and his eyes widened little by little as he read it. A prize for the students who got the best grades in each year, a one-week chance to go outside the Academy and visit your parents. Hina had mentioned students could send letters, but Marco didn't know an address to direct them to, so what use was it? If he had the chance to be outside the gates, though, that was a whole other story.

"Is this true?"

"Yeah! Isn't it cool? But it's so hard to win, it's not fair," Luffy whined.

"You don't study enough, that's why it's so hard." Izo rolled his eyes. "But it is true, from what we know. Never won myself, but I've met some who did. A few people get very serious when it gets near exams time, so unless you do really well on all of them, you have no chance."

"It's nice to know, though. Thanks." Marco pocketed the paper, cogs already moving inside his mind. He could do it; he was never terrible at studies. It was his chance.

"No problem." Izo smiled. "You know, you seem familiar. Have we talked in the corridors or something?"

"I don't think so. I'm in the second year."

Izo snapped his fingers. "Class A, right? I think I saw you around Ace, that's why. I'm from 2-C."

"I didn't know there was a third class."

"There are in the last two years, but the classes end up much smaller."

"Around Ace? Marco?" Luffy murmured, bringing Marco's attention to him. Luffy was squinting his eyes at him, arms crossed. "Oh! Aren't you Ace's partner?"

"I wouldn't say partner, but I guess I am," Marco answered. "You know him?"

"Yeah! He's my brother!"

Marco stared at Luffy and his sunshine smile. He was Ace's brother — the grumpy boy with the little patience and who was full of frowns.

Well, he wasn't here to judge.

"That'sâ€¦ uh, cool," he said when Luffy kept looking at him with expectance.

"Shishishi, yeah, it is! Ace is awesome!"

"I bet he isâ€¦"

"As much as I'd like to keep talking, we also need to continue our project, Luffy," Izo sighed, then looked at Marco. "Do you want to join? I can give you the details as we work."

"I'd be nice, thank you, but can it be tomorrow? I wasn't planning on coming here, and I need to organize some things." His thoughts and schedule needed to be in order before he started anything.

"Of course."

"See you tomorrow, then."

Marco smiled at them, and Izo nodded back as Luffy waved his arm in an energetic goodbye. He walked out of the classroom feeling better than he had before, and with a new plan cooking inside his head. The Academy might take precautions to keep the students inside and intruders out, and the staff seemed to think that was enough to chase away thoughts of running away, but not for Marco. He didn't accept to study here without thinking about escaping, and this prize could make things much easier for him.

A low shushing caught Marco's attention when he neared a bifurcation in the corridor. Through instinct, he partially activated his Alice and concentrated, and a sound of soft crying joined the shushing.

It was only a child. It made sense, since they were in the elementary school building.

It was none of his business, so he continued walking. Nonetheless, on his way outside he passed by the origin of the noises, so Marco had no trouble seeing a woman carrying a very small child â€" a toddler.

"It's alright, it's alright," the woman said, moving the toddler a bit, and the realization that she was trying to lull them came delayed.

"B-but it-" the child hiccupped, "mommy!"

"Mommy isn't here, little one. It was just a nightmare, don't worry."

The toddler was wearing a red Alice Academy uniform.

Marco continued walking in autopilot, because of course he had seen it wrong. The toddler was wearing red clothes, not the academy's uniform; there was no way someone so young was confined there, not at an age when it was clear they needed their parents and the opportunity to learn with them, not the obligation to stay hidden because of powers they didn't even understand.

Right?

Unfortunately, Marco had seen it right.

He leaned against a pillar near the entrance and covered his mouth. Haruta's face flashed in his mind " she was so young when they met, and Marco couldn't help but imagine her trying to hold back tears back in that corridor, all alone. It was an immense relief to know she didn't have an Alice, nor did any of his brothers. They were safe somewhere far away " safer than when Marco had been there.

Marco subconsciously stopped his Alice's senses, so it wasn't until someone touched his shoulder that Marco noticed someone calling for him.

"Whoa, calm down, it's just me." Thatch's face greeted him, and Marco took a shuddering breath before forcing his body to drop the defensive posture.

"Sorry. You startled me."

"Yeah, I can see that. Sorry too. Also coming from your ability class?" Thatch asked, and Marco nodded, quiet. "What happened?"

Marco's hand clenched.

"Thatch, the different colored uniforms represent what? Age?"

"Yeah, in a way," Thatch answered. "Orange for High school, blue for Middle School and red for Elementary."

"All red is for Elementary School?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I saw a child - no, a toddler, with a tiny version of the red uniform." Understanding flashed in Thatch's eyes. "I was wrong, right? It can't-"

"Of course it can." Thatch's gaze turned to a spot on the wall with a small dirty stain, and his shoulders sagged. For the first time, Marco saw bitterness in his eyes. "As long as you aren't older than eighteen, you're brought here if you're found. So yes, there are kids as young as three, two, even one year old living here."

Older than eighteen - Marco had been so close to escaping it was revolting. In comparison, there were children here so young they'd never remember what life was like outside the walls of Alice Academy, much less anything about their relatives or whoever they used to live with.

Marco knew what freedom was, knew how part of the world looked like, knew people and their malice. Those children knew security, had greater chances of controlling their powers quicker in the future, but for that they had to be inside this school for years " a suffocating thought that left a sour taste in Marco's mouth.

But did they think the same? Did they even feel locked if they didn't know anything outside of Alice Academy? Would they even recollect enough to care? Marco wondered if that was better than

remembering.

Suddenly, he didn't feel well anymore.

"Welcome to Alice Academy."

* * *

><p>It wasn't hard to get caught up in Alice Academy's rhythm. After three days, Marco had a lot of his surroundings memorized and less free time than he wanted, but it was stimulating having to juggle the subjects and his own personal schedule. Marco could pass the sleepiness, though, but it was hard to fall asleep quickly when he wasn't as tired as the first night.<p>

In the midst of everything, Marco forgot one important detail: Ace was still his supposed partner. He was reminded of it when Ace's grump face greeted him when Marco exited his classroom in the next day.

"â€|Hey," Marco hesitated, because what was he supposed to say after the when they first talked?

Ace nodded at him, his frown deepening.

â€|Another great start. Silence might just be the answer to dealing with this uncalled relation.

As if in a show of agreement, Ace nodded again and started walking, taking a piece of paper from his pocket and presenting it to Marco. He took it and realized it was a map of the Academy's grounds, and couldn't help but smile.

"Thanks."

Ace nodded again, but didn't say anything and kept his eyes looking forward, bored expression on his face.

It was then that a shine caught Marco's eyes, and he found himself staring at an earring and a metallic ear ornament on Ace's ear, almost hidden by his hair. The ornament was similar to Marco's, but where his was plain metal with round borders, Ace's had swirls and undulated line, and the earring had a stunning small stone ball; it was red with orange strikes, and it seemed to shine even when they turned and the sun's rays didn't hit it anymore.

Marco's hand moved to his own ear - Ace's eyes flickered at him at the motion, and a flash of something passed through his eyes. Ace's were power restrainers too, then.

"Where are we going?" Marco asked, trying again. It was after class, and looking through the window showed the surroundings were full of students hanging around on the grass, near some trees, or on benches. The day wasn't too hot, and with sleep clinging to his eyelids, Marco wished he could join them on a patch of grass of his own.

"To the library," Ace answered. "Not that we have to stay there for long."

Marco perked up in attention, all thoughts of sleep fading from his

mind. The library was a good idea. If he studied outside his room, the chances of him tiring himself out and making it easier to sleep would grow.

Ace lead Marco in complete silence, a yawn here and there being the only other expression he showed, and it seemed like they couldn't arrive quickly enough.

The library was a big place. They passed by the receptionist typing on a computer and rows of bookcases before Marco found a table to the corner, a bit farther away from others, which should work fine in case Ace showed interest in participating and they started talking.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the case, since Ace sat down with a heavy sigh, crossed his arms above the table, and laid his head down on them, leaving only his forehead and eyebrows in sight. Marco took the chair opposite of Ace, and put his school bag on the one beside it, taking his time to retrieve his notebook, some books, and a pencil case.

Ace didn't make a single sound.

Marco gave in to the urge to sigh quietly. Dealing with the prolonged silence wasn't a problem, much less inside a library and with books to study, so he shrugged mentally and decided to continue on as if he was by himself.

He was startled when he noticed, from the corner of his eye, Ace's eyes looking at him from above his arms, but when Marco turned to him, they diverted and he was back to seeming as bored as at the start.

â€|It was a reaction, at least, as weird as it was.

Marco picked a paper where he had written all the subjects he needed to review or catch up, and opened the first book, but then his concentration was broken when he felt eyes on him again. This, Marco couldn't deal with for long.

"Aren't we both supposed to be studying?" He asked. To his surprise, there was an answer.

"I know."

Then Ace turned his head to the side, sighed again and seemed to lock a stare on the bookcase to his right. His school bag laid to his left on the table, still untouched since they had sat down.

Marco supposed he should call this a success given he got an actual verbal answer. It seemed like nothing more would come from this interaction, though.

"Suit yourself," he sighed, then turned his attention back to his book. It wasn't worth getting rattled over this when it would only hinder him in his objective. He needed to study, get tired, and have a good night of sleep - and so he would.

It took some minutes â€" enough for Marco to focus his whole attention on the text â€" before a ruffling of clothes, loud enough

to be a distraction, reached his ears. His eyes flickered up in time to see Ace straightening up and start drumming one thumb on his other hand. His mouth was still clamped shut, however.

If anything, it'd be interesting to see how long Ace lasted without doing anything, and so Ace's noises fell to the background as Marco turned back to his task.

This time, the silence was maintained for longer, but when it was broken it was with an onslaught of words.

"Okay, just so I'll know. How long do you plan on staying here? It's been a really long while since you started."

Marco marked the paragraph he just finished with his index finger, and looked up with a raised eyebrow. "Isn't that the reason why we came here?"

"But we've been here for an hour. That's more than enough time," Ace answered narrowing his eyes. His expression tightened, and if it had been someone else, Marco would have suspected they were going to pout. As it was, Ace looked closer to scowling with the impatience radiating from him.

"If it had been an hour, then yes. But it hasn't, so no," Marco rebuked. He glanced at the clock on the wall as a precaution, but as he thought, they had been there for around thirty-five minutes.

He saw Ace look at the clock too and frown before he murmured "damn" under his breath.

Thus, he managed to get Ace to stop talking, this time in a very close to sulking position. Marco wondered with vague amusement if he could get Ace to react again.

"Maybe if you open a book, time will pass quicker," Marco suggested.

Ace snorted, and didn't say anything further, so Marco left him to his grumpiness.

The minutes passed by in a blur. Marco changed from one subject to another, making a superficial read to freshen his memory before he delved into unknown topics. It was easier with geography, history, and biology — those were topics he was interested in and actively went after books about — whilst the ones with formulas, rules, and too many numbers and random letters didn't seem to click. It was going to be a pain to remember all that.

"Now it's been an hour."

Marco blinked sluggishly as he looked up, the abrupt interruption making him forget what he had just read. "Then go. I'm not keeping you here," he snapped, annoyance surging.

"Believe me, I would if I could, but I was told to show you around and they'll know if I don't. Can't you cooperate and make it easier for me? I'd have left this as the last place if I knew you were a bookworm, geez."

"I need and want to study, so I will be here for a while longer. Just go and you can continue your job tomorrow."

"I already said I can't."

Marco prided himself in having a lot of patience when dealing with people, but even he had his limits. He was going to get that prize, damn it. "That's not my problem."

"Look here asshole-"

"Right, because you've been a sea of sunshine since I've met you."

"You don't know anything about me," Ace hissed.

"That goes both ways."

They glared at each other. The scene seemed familiar.

Their stare down ended when the receptionist showed up to reprehend them for making noise, and by then Marco had lost his desire to study. He closed his book harsher than necessary, and leaned his forehead against the cover. "We're acting like children."

"Yeah."

Then the silence was back. Marco considered whether it was worth it trying to re-start, but his concentration was still scattered. It was ridiculous how he had become such a mess in a matter of days. Ironic that Alice Academy managed that when the former problems in his life hadn't.

He missed his family.

Marco sighed and opened the book again, but after the words kept swimming back and forth in his vision for a few minutes he gave up.

"Why are you so set on studying now?" Ace's question startled Marco.

"What?"

"I mean, you have time. It's June, we have a small break for summer vacation coming soon, and the exams are only at the end of October, in case you don't know. You're going to have spare time to study."

Ace's expression was softer with plain curiosity and tiredness, and the logic made Marco sigh.

"I don't know. I need to feel like I'm doing something. I want that one week away prize."

It wasn't like him, but here he was, close to opening his heart to a complete stranger he didn't trust. He had enough experience to know better, but now he was so tired. No matter what Marco thought about Alice Academy, it was a safe place for Alices regarding the outside,

so it shouldn't get any worse. It was only another student like him who was listening, and maybe he even lived some of what Marco had, maybe he had had worse.

Really, who was he to judge?

Ace rolled his eyes. "That lie?"

"It's not a lie," Marco answered automatically, but then stopped, because how far did his classmates' knowledge go when they hadn't ever won that prize? "People have won it before."

"Yeahâ€¦| But nobody who did talks much about it. It's prohibited, I think, and that's very suspicious."

A heavy feeling settled on Marco's chest. It was.

"Then I'll have to search around," Marco said after a while of silence. "It's an opportunity, and I'll grab it if I can."

"An opportunity to see our family," Ace murmured, his gaze low on the table and seeming far away.

"Isn't it worth trying? Best case scenario, it's true and we go out, and even if we end up not being allowed to talk with them, wouldn't it be nice to see the outside world? It's stifling being here for too long."

"It feels like being locked in a cage. Heh, you're still new here, you know nothing."

Silence surrounded them once more, but this time it had a thoughtful tinge to it. Marco decided it was better to let this last comment go, and with his calm rebuilt, he opened his book, leaving Ace to his thoughts. This was the most they had talked so far, and despite the inconclusive end, it had a better feel to it than the one from before.

Right as Marco neared the end of the page, his attention was caught by a zipper being opened then pages being flipped.

Well, it was progress.

* * *

><p>"Excuse me, but could you tell me who Marco is?"<p>

Marco's hand stopped mid-word, and he looked up just in time to see a classmate point to the back of the room where he was and a redheaded girl beside them grin. He rummaged through his head, but her face didn't look familiar.

"Thanks," she said, and Marco looked back down at his notebook as she headed towards him.

He had a vain hope that the 'Marco' she meant wasn't him but instead a classmate whose name he didn't remember, but it was crushed when she stopped in front of his table. Marco looked up to see her smiling, and tapped his pen on the paper.

"Hi."

"Hiâ€|"

"Not sure if you know, but I'm Nami."

"Marco, but you already know that," he said, and resigned himself to not continuing his work anytime soon. It was math, so he couldn't say he minded much.

"Yes. You're Ace's partner," Nami stated, sounding far too certain for it to be a question, so Marco stayed quiet. "I have a question for you, if you don't mind," and without waiting for an answer, she continued. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Make Ace study."

"â€|What?"

"Exactly. It's been a few days, but all of a sudden Ace started studying â€" really studying, not his usual half-assed tries to just do enough to pass â€" and now he's asking questions, and-" Nami shook her head. "How did you do it?"

Marco only watched as Nami stared hard at him, her smile taking a sharp edge, and closed his eyes. He knew that expression she was making â€" it's when you're frustrated with something you can't understand, but he didn't know what he had to do with it this time. Ace continued his job of showing Marco around after the library day for the rest of that week, then a few more days after the weekend, but it had been two weeks now since Marco had last seen him.

"I just talked with him."

"About what?" She insisted, emphasizing the second word.

Marco rolled his eyes. "What is this, a hundred questions?"

"I'm friend, and I'm curious, that's all."

"Uh-huhâ€| Well, I mentioned the best grades prize, and said I'm going after it."

"That bullshit?" Nami looked skeptical, to which Marco felt a sliver of annoyance.

"As I said to him, I can't be sure it's true, but he also wasn't able give me proof it isn't. I'm sure you can't either." Nami opened her mouth, but closed it with a shrug, displeased. "I think it's worth trying if it means the chance of going out, even if we don't get the chance of talking with our family."

"Ohâ€|" Nami's eyes widened a fraction. "That's why. That moronâ€|" She continued, but it didn't have any bite.

"Is that it?"

"Yes. Guess I was pretty intrusive, my bad." She twisted a strand of

hair around a finger, thoughtful expression growing on her face. "Also, thanks. Can't say I approve of the way, but what you did is helping Ace."

"Don't thank me, it was plain luck it did something," Marco replied. He couldn't avoid a smile at the thought because it was fulfilling to be useful. The not-so-awful second meeting was in a better light in his eyes as he replayed it " Ace did seem interested in the end.

"True," Nami agreed, and that was that.

Marco closed his notebook and gathered his belongings, deciding it was too beautiful a Thursday afternoon to stay in the classroom during lunch. He was going to find Thatch, and ask on what could be done for fun at night. There was time, and he didn't feel like studying at all today anymore.

"Hey," Nami said, and Marco was surprised to see her accompanying him outside. "Has Ace shown you Central Town?"

The memory of seeing what he thought was a small village on his first day came to his mind. "No, not yet."

"Me, Ace, and some friends are going there on Saturday. What do you say about joining us?"

"What time?"

"After breakfast. We plan on having lunch there, but you're free to go whenever you prefer. There's a lot to do there, it'll be good for you to know the places."

Marco recognized the baiting for what it was, but it didn't sound too bad anyway. "Sure."

"Great." Nami smiled, but this time it had a different tinge to it. Mischievousness looked far too natural on her. "See you in two days."

"Bye," Marco answered, but he doubted he was heard as Nami hurried out the door with a casual wave.

It was something to do and a new place to know, at least. Marco hoped it wouldn't be too bad " staying around people he hadn't deemed trustful wasn't his cup of tea, and it was far from relaxing, but it was also a habit he had to break sometimes. This sounded like the perfect time to start.

2. Chapter 2

On Saturday, Marco found Nami waiting for him outside the dining hall in the dormitories. She was chatting with Luffy, who was the first to notice and greet him with a loud "Marco!", a sleepy-looking Ace and a third boy with heavy eye bags.

"Took you long enough," Nami said, hands on her hips.

"You didn't specify a time."

Luffy sniggered and the other boy snorted. "So much for complaining about him being late."

"Shut up, you also arrived late."

"No, that was Ace and Luffy."

"Anyway," Nami turned to Marco with a clap, ignoring the boy's last comment. "If we're all here, then let's get going. The bus leaves in ten minutes."

"Bus?" Marco asked, because since when there were buses inside Alice Academy?

"It ta-" Ace started but yawned mid-word, "-kes more than half an hour to get there. Of course we're going to get the bus."

"He's wondering about the fact that there are buses in here, not why," the unnamed boy said.

"I'm tired, 't's not my fault."

"Of fucking course it's your fault when you chose not to sleep for more than five hours. Your narcolepsy is coming to bite you in the ass."

"It hasn't graced me with its existence in days. It isn't so convenient as to come when I need it, so shut it Nami. I was distracted last night."

Nami complained about something under her breath to which Ace answered in the same tone. Marco changed his attention from them, when it seemed their topic was getting personal, to the boy, who sighed when he asked for an explanation. "There are some buses that go around the Academy during the weekend. They follow a strict schedule, and there are only a few. That's why we need to hurry."

"I see. Thanks."

"I'm Law."

"Nice to meet you," Marco said, the words sounding repetitive for him after a few weeks. "I'm Marco."

"I know."

Law put his hands in his pants pockets and didn't offer any other words.

"Marco's the pineapple," Luffy said, suddenly.

"I'm the what?"

"Pineapple?"

"Yeah! His head reminds me of one," Luffy answered, a bright smile and a sort of innocence radiating from him that left Marco uncertain whether to be annoyed or exasperated.

"Haven't heard that one before," he settled on saying.

"Heh, it does look like one."

"Now that you mention itâ€¦"

Luffy laughed, and Marco felt a tension he hadn't noticed before dissipating between the group. A strange conversation about comparing people to fruits began, leaving Marco amused the rest of the way. According to Luffy, if Ace dyed his hair green and got embarrassed, he'd "be the most perfect strawberry ever".

"What the hell are you all making me talk about at nine in the morning?" Law murmured, and Ace loudly agreed with him.

After that, they arrived at the stop, and the bus arrived soon after. From there on the conversation flowed to the simpler topic of ability classes, and Marco discovered both Ace and Nami were from the Latent class. Law was a strange case, though; he was both in the latent and technical classes, and his explanation was that he had two Alices with different characteristics â€" a Healing Alice, that did exactly what its name suggested, and a Chemist Alice, that Law was studying most to understand what chemical reaction provoked the most random effects from his Alice.

Marco wound up letting his mind wander with thoughts about having to deal with more than one ability for a big portion of the ride. It made him think of Pops, if his health was still bad, and of his siblings, and the remembrance of how much he missed them made him ache.

"Marco."

He turned from his position face almost glued to the window to look to his side, but instead of in the window two rows ahead, he found Ace occupying the seat beside him.

"Do you mind if I sit here?"

Marco rose an eyebrow. "No."

"Okay. Uh, your forehead is red," Ace commented, and Marco frowned and hid it with a hand.

"You wanted to talk about something?" He asked when Ace remained in silence.

"Actually, yes." Ace's gaze went to his fiddling fingers. "I guess I wanted toâ€¦ thank you."

"Thank me? For getting you to studyâ€¦?" Nami's words rang in his head, but he still couldn't understand what was so outstanding about the situation. Somewhat unusual, but was it reason enough for her to invite Marco to hang out with her friends?

"Not exactly, but yeah. I wasâ€¦ Well, it's hard to explain without taking too long, but I agree with you. It's worth a shot to try. I guess I needed something to grab onto that gave me a plan B regarding something andâ€¦ yeah. Just, thanks."

Ace gave a curt bow, awkward due to the bus movement, and looked away. Marco heard the clear sincerity in his words, though, and smiled. "It's okay. I'm glad I was of help somehow."

Marco nudged Ace's shoulder good-naturedly, and for the first time since they met, Ace grinned. The usual crinkles on his forehead disappeared, his face becoming relaxed, and he seemed to shine. All of a sudden, it wasn't so hard to see connect him and Luffy as brothers.

"Heh, so what about a new start?" Ace offered Marco a hand. "Nice to meet you. My name is Ace, and I'll be your partner for your first months in Alice Academy â€" that means I'm sort of your guide, so ask me whatever."

Marco shook his hand. "I'm Marco. Thank you, and likewise."

"There. Much better than our first two meetings."

"What was with the snake, by the way?"

"Salome? Ah, there's a girl one year younger than us called Hancock who has the Pheromones Alice. She can pretty much enchant anyone to fall to her feet, and somewhere along the road, she found this human-like snake and became friends with it. She wants a favor from me, but I was, uh, avoiding her, so she sent that stupid snake after me." Ace shuddered. "I don't know why the teachers let her keep a snake in the school."

"Ah." Marco nodded. He had heard by now about this girl, so it made sense. "That sounds like a dangerous power to have." Transmitting pheromones that controlled people's feelings by touch that irked Marco; if he was to do something, then it should be by his willingness.

"It is. The funny thing is that Luffy isn't affected by it somehow. The annoying part is that she's infatuated with him because he's been immune for years now. Of course, I end up suffering as the brother and the mobile 'voicemail'. Ah, wait a second. Luffy!"

Ace leaned against the seat in front of him, and Luffy turned his head like an owl to look at him from it. Luffy's Rubber Alice was still eerie for Marco, and this topped everything he had seen so far, so he left Ace to talk with his brother and tried to distract himself with the scenario outside. It was when he noticed the bus had stopped.

"This is our stop, let's go," Nami said.

Marco passed by Ace, who patted a puzzled Luffy's shoulder before leaving the bus with him.

"Where are we going first?" Marco asked once all five of them stopped under a "Welcome to Central Town" plaque.

"Bakery!"

"Candy store."

Ace and Luffy paused at their disagreement. They exchanged a

thoughtful glance, Luffy nodded and Ace crossed his arms. "Let's buy Howalon."

"What?"

Nami sighed. "You're hungry all the time."

"It's not a bad idea, though. We have time, and Howalon is one of the most sold products here," Law said.

Luffy cheered.

"What is that?"

"It's a sweet, but you'll have to eat it to really understand the taste," Ace explained. "And yes, we just had breakfast, but I promise it's light."

They walked to the center of the town where most streets met in a circle. There were stalls everywhere, each of a different color and with flashy banners welcoming visitors and exposing their products, and they seemed successful. The small fountain in the middle almost disappeared behind them, and the only reason Marco noticed it was because there was someone playing a flute near it and was attracting attention and accompanying claps.

Ace tapped his shoulder and pointed to the left, where Luffy had dashed away with Nami behind him and Law was following at a normal pace.

"Leave seeing around for later or the Howalons will end."

"Are they that popular?"

Ace had a serious expression when he looked at Marco. "You'll understand when you taste it."

Disbelieving, Marco followed Ace, and no sooner said than done, he understood.

They bought the package with eight, the smallest and most delicate-looking one. Inside, there was candy Marco could only think of associating with glittery cotton balls — they were round, fluffy, white as milk and had a small glint due to some sugar crystals at the top. Holding it felt like cotton candy, and despite melting the same way it did, Howalon had a unique taste of its own.

Sugary, but far from being nauseating. It reminded Marco of sugar and milk, then of a candy Whitebeard used to give him sometimes when he was a child. It held a mix of flavors inside it, and somehow was still light.

Marco bought another to take to the dormitories and eat later.

"See? I told you." Ace grinned. There was a small piece of Howalon stuck to the side of his mouth, and Marco pointed at it with a smile even as he agreed and Ace licked it off.

Luffy finished devouring — and there was no better word to use —

his package of Howalon and two hot-cats - another strange goodie - just as Nami came back with two bags and Law at her side with a book.

"Central Town is great! So many shops and so many good prices," Nami commented with a big smile.

"That you manage to get even lowerâ€¦!"

"That's the best part, silly."

"Why is there a so-called town inside the Academy?" Marco asked.

"Well, you know after we graduate from high school we're supposed to stay here for three more years to show we're capable of controlling our powers well enough to mingle with society unnoticed," Law said, closing his book and putting it back inside his school bag. "Everyone who's here has an Alice. Some are waiting for that observation time to end, some decided they're going to stay here and work with something that needs their powers."

"There are shops of all sorts, restaurants, banks, libraries, houses, and much more. It has all the things that are needed for people to live here," Nami added.

"There's even a cinema." Ace nudged Marco's shoulder and poked Nami's. "Why don't we go there?"

"We can do that later," Law interrupted, looking at the watch on his wrist. "It's about the time we agreed on meeting."

"So I'll go see Hammock!" Luffy paused and scratched his head. "Uhâ€¦ where am I supposed to go?"

"Hammock?"

"It's Hancock." Ace sighed. "And it's at Amazon Restaurant, Luffy. Don't even think about spending your whole money there, you hear me?"

"Shishish, don't worry, Ace. See ya later!"

Luffy took off in a direction while Nami and Law took the lead in another. Ace talked about the shops they passed by in a cheery tone, making Marco smile at the cheeriness he showed â€" Central Town seemed like a place he really enjoyed.

"Who are we meeting?" Marco asked after they turned right in a bifurcation.

"Oh, we're going to visit some friends. They're in the observation time, so they're living in small apartments here. You'll like them, they're-" A loud crash echoed, interrupting him. Marco started, but no one on the street reacted like him. He huffed when Ace laughed at him. "It's normal, don't worry. Franky must have arrived already. Come one, we're here."

"Here?"

It was a small building with three floors and two potted plants on each side of the large opened doors. They entered, went up the stairs, and stopped in front of a door with the number 101.

"Oi, Robin! It's us," Nami knocked, and not two seconds later the door opened and a woman with black hair greeted them with a smile.

"Come in."

On the couch, a man with startling blue hair looked at them as he combed his hair.

"You guys took a suuper long time to arrive! What held you back?" He asked, exchanging the comb for a screwdriver before he turned to a machine on the ground before him and started tinkling with it. A spark flew from it and the man cursed.

"We were showing Ace's partner around." Law shrugged.

"Ah, so you must be Marco," Robin said. "Nice to meet you."

"AOW! I'm Franky. Nice to meet you, Marco-bro." Franky gave him a thumbs up.

"Likewise." Marco smile, wondering when his name had been mentioned to them.

"Go on ahead and sit down. I'll get us something to drink. Do you prefer tea or coffee?" Robin asked, strangely sitting down on an armchair in front of the couch.

Marco decided to stay beside Franky, and Ace slumped down beside him. "Coffee, please."

Then she closed her eyes and crossed her arms in front of her chest breathing falling quiet. If Marco didn't know better, he'd think she had fallen into deep slumber with an amused smile still on her face.

The reason for that became apparent when a trail of arms and hands formed a trail to another room, and soon drinks were being passed from one to the other until they reached one of the visitors. Marco stared at the hand holding a cup of coffee to him, but took it and thanked it.

"You're welcome," Robin answered, and then it clicked what her Alice did.

"What do you think of the Academy so far?" Franky asked.

Marco took a sip from his coffee to stall. What did he think? His first thoughts had been dark, that this place was hell, but it wasn't, no matter how much he wanted to hate every person to every piece of grass. It had a good structure to learn and Marco's classmates had been the best company he could've wished for at a place like this. There was no reason not to like Alice Academy, but its personnel— Marco still woke up some mornings drenched in sweat, dreadful memories clouding his mind, and aching to be home.

"It's okay. The classes are better than I thought, but that's expected from the school for geniuses," he answered, not being able to hold a snort at the end. "I don't like most of the staff, though."

Franky nodded. "Heh, that's right. They're rotten."

"Not all of them, Robin corrected.

"Well, I've got a story to tell ya. When we were-

Marco wished he got to hear the rest of the story.

Instead, the machine in front of Franky let out a high pitched noise, making everyone flinch, and when the sound of something breaking and going loose came, he didn't notice in time. Metal seemed to scratch on metal, then Marco felt a familiar sting on his cheek.

Marco snapped up, eyes barely catching a small steel plate jointed to a spring stained in red on the ground, before he whirled around, trying to find a bathroom. His heart rate sped up when he felt the itching of his flames under his skin, urging him to let them emerge and heal, but then-

-then there was a hand holding his shoulder, and Law's face appeared in his field of vision saying something about letting him help, but Marco couldn't because his control on his flames wasn't perfect yet and they couldn't see them, couldn't-

Law turned him around, and Marco gasped a "stop" too late. His flames burst free with an astounding intensity, They consumed his shoulder, neck, and concentrated around the cut on his cheek until the sting was no more and there was only an immense relief at the liberating feel they brought. Marco had missed using his flames.

"They don't burn?"

He was startled back into reality by Law's voice, who looked at his hand in wonder. His head whirled up and Law's gaze fell heavy on Marco's injury "or where it was supposed to be.

"You have healing flames? That's your Alice?"

But Marco couldn't answer. A spike of anxiety made him take a step back then another when Law tried to approach "he might have run out the door if he tried to touch Marco as memories from not too long ago threatened to overwhelm him.

"Marco."

Ace showed up in front of him and pointed at his hand. There was a strange look in his eyes, one of such a pure curiosity that Marco offered his hand back. Ace linked their index fingers, and suddenly there was another fire, this one a gorgeous mix of red and orange, and it was so warm as it touched Marco's skin that he forgot to breath for a moment. His own flames came up instinctively, and he watched in amazement and they seemed to dance around each other.

"My flames don't burn you at all, huh?" Ace murmured.

"Your Alice?"

"Yeah. I have the Fire-Manipulation one."

Marco glanced up and saw Ace seemed just as entranced by the flames as Marco had been.

They exchanged a look and separated their fingers at the same time both took a few steps away from each other. Marco avoided Ace's eyes, feeling a kind of burn on his face that had nothing to do with flames, and released a shaky breath. His heart was thumping hard inside his chest.

"I didn't know there could be two Alices of the same type!" Nami commented softly.

Marco saw the others were looking at him in either surprise, interest or wonder, and he looked at his hands.

"Law said it. My flames aren't like Ace's, they're healing."

"Then shouldn't you be in the Latent class?" Law interjected.

Marco shrugged. "The flames are because I half-transform into an animal."

"An animal?"

"What sort of animal can heal itself?"

A selfish one, Marco wanted to say, but his lips only pressed into a thin line. He felt tension ride his shoulders, and he knew there was no escaping an explanation unless he ran away, and he didn't feel inclined toward that option.

He was inside Alice Academy's grounds, where everyone had Alices. These people weren't here to hurt him — hell, they even showed their Alices without asking to see Marco's in return.

"What, is it a mythical creature or something?"

"Yes. I have the Phoenix Alice."

"Ace, wait a second!" Nami shouted, but Ace moved nearer, stopping closer to Marco than he was used to. He swallowed thickly and took a step back, but Ace didn't seem to mind, eyes glinting with something wild.

"Can you fly?"

"Why?"

"Please, can you?"

"For short distances, yes. But—"

"Ace, you can't be thinking—"

"Of course I am! It's perfect." Ace turned to the others and spread his arms, excited. "He can help us!"

"But bro, phoenixes are said to be surrounded by flames, right? Those Marco showed us are super bright, they'll attract attention."

Ace's arms fell to his sides, and he asked "You canâ€¦ make something for that, can't you? Do the flames burn? Do your flames burn?" in an anxious tone.

Marco found himself under Ace's intense stare once again, his eyes burning like the red earring that shined on his ear due to the sun rays coming from a window. His tongue felt like lead and his throat dry, so Marco only shook his head.

"Right, because they're healing flames." Ace nodded, satisfied with the answer, and Franky crossed his arms.

"I suppose I can prepare a cape or something similar to hide the flames. It needs to be light, or he won't be able to carry anyone andâ€¦" Franky continued murmuring to himself, technical words entering his speech and confusing Marco even more.

"Wait, what's going on? I haven't even agreed to anything," he snapped.

Ace opened and closed his mouth a few times before rubbing the back of his neck. "That wasn't fair of me. Sorry, it's justâ€¦. We have a plan and it'd be very useful to have your help. Do any of you disagree?"

"I'll leave that to you bros and sis. I don't know him," Franky said, then turned to Marco. "No offense. And I'm really sorry for that just now. Didn't think the spring would go up like that."

"None taken and it'sâ€¦ alright." It seemed to be alright, at least. Marco's instincts weren't screaming at him to get out, even if he couldn't get rid of his tension.

"I have to agree with Franky." Robin nodded.

The decision was left to Law and Nami, who exchanged a long silent look. In the end, Law rolled his eyes and Nami sighed.

"I suppose it's not that surprising since I invited him. I thought something like this could happen if Marco's Alice was useful."

"Go on," Law added.

"I want to ask you something first, if you don't mind," Robin said. She had a serene smile on her face as she leaned forward and picked a biscuit. "Do you like this school?"

"Not really."

"Good." Robin nodded and broke the biscuit in the middle. "We're going to turn a few things upside down in the high school section." She ate one half and let the other back with the rest, then went to a bedside table and fetched a few clipped papers in a drawer. "Some years ago, when Franky and I were about to finish Middle School, rumors started going around about the High School director's low tolerance for disorder. They said students who disobeyed rules or

created chaos too much would receive another punishment besides the electrical mask " I suppose you've heard about that one by now?"

Marco glanced at Ace, who nodded. "The fox one I had that day is one of them. They give small electrical shocks from time to time and leave you with a fucking headache for days."

"Not pleasant at all," Robin agreed. "And they're called controlling devices, so people were worried about news of this so called new punishment. We got proof of its existence not long after that from some classmates who disappeared for a few days and returned saying they had been under training to correct their behavior at school."

"It was super weird. From the way they acted, it didn't seem like a punishment, but whenever someone asked for details or suggested it wouldn't be too bad to get that training, they paled," Franky added. He shook his head. "No one described what happened during the training, and we suspect they were prohibited."

"Then, during the most recent years, when everyone here was in high school, we got more proof in the form of someone who came back from it limping. They never got better."

Marco straightened, a cold feeling washing over him. He had an idea where this was headed.

"These papers have all the solid evidence we gathered so far. It's not much, and not nearly enough to do anything against the director, but it's a start. Now we're going after more." Robin handed Marco the papers, and he looked them over.

"And what are you going to do after you get what you want?"

"We'll expose the truth to the others students," Ace said. Marco glanced at him and saw his fists were clenched, knuckles white. "He's a douchebag who's ready to do anything to reach his desired end. Fuck the consequences to the students, rules are rules. Bastard."

"A few of us have had many problems with him in the past." Nami twisted a strand of hair, a distant look in her eyes. "If we expose him, everyone is going to be aware of his true nature, and even if his superiors allow drastic behavioral reforming, he'll meet much more resistance."

"He's getting careless. Ace is gathering some physical evidences that he's making the control devices worse." Franky pointed to the corridor. "I can show you later, if Robin doesn't mind me using her computer. The punishment masks? The more you go there, the more he changes the one you wear and the pain gets worse " it's all in the mechanisms behind them."

"I got into trouble a few dozen times and brought them here for analysis. I bumped into you right after getting put inside the last one. It was kinda more annoying than the ones from before, so I wasn't| very happy."

Marco started. What? "Ace-

"Nah, it's over now. We needed it, and I did my part." Ace shrugged, nonchalant about the fact he had offered to be subjected to pain in order to study the masks.

Marco frowned. A detail from his talk with Nami seemed to connect with Corazon's decision to make Ace his partner, and it had been nagging him this past night. With Ace's words, and now this plain reckless attitude— Damn.

The look in the others' faces showed they didn't like the fact anymore than he did. Marco didn't want to think of what would've happened if Luffy wasn't in the academy with his brother.

"The high school director," Marco started. " It's Akainu, right? He's mad."

Marco remembered him from the outside, an imposing figure in an all-red suit appearing without warning to visit Marco in his last house. He had never seen Pops so displeased and ready to throw someone out, and at the time, Marco didn't take Akainu's warning that he couldn't hide forever seriously, even if his father told him the academy had a very dark side and shouldn't be taken lightly.

A few weeks later, an Alice kidnapper almost took him, cost Whitebeard, Haruta, and Vista a visit to the hospital, and left Marco with no choice but to accept Alice Academy's offer to pay for their expenses in exchange for studying there - here.

"We're planning to invade the files in his computer to find what we need. We have the virus, and I know how to use it to find and copy the information, but someone to watch my back and a quick mode of transportation in case anything goes wrong are important too. Ace volunteered to help me, so—" Nami trailed off.

"You're thinking of using my flying capabilities." Marco shook his head. "I don't even know if I can fly with one person, let alone two."

A silence was made between them and the disappointment showed, but Marco couldn't agree to so something he had no guarantee would work. He felt awful for making them spill their secrets in exchange for nothing.

"I can help with that," Law said, breaking the stillness. "Da-Corazon doesn't seem like much, but he knows how to train Somatic abilities well. I'm sure he'll know what to do, and my Alice should be able to strengthen your wings."

"Oh-ho, you were going to call him Dad."

"Shut up, I wasn't."

"No need to hide it, Torao. We all know you love him."

"I said shut up. And don't use that stupid name."

"Awn, don't say that about Luffy's nickname." Ace sniggered, then sobered up. "What do you say, Marco?"

So many things could go wrong with this, and a list of a few came to

his mind " especially what sort of repercussion his family could end up having. He wouldn't put it past Akainu. Even so, Marco felt an energy he hadn't felt in awhile course through his blood at the thought of exposing the dirt inside the academy his father told him about.

"Let's see how I deal with the weight, but I'll try. I'm in."

Law nodded whilst Nami and Ace high-fived.

The start of his day at Central Town turned out to be far from any of Marco's expectations. That was good.

* * *

><p>"Law, you came to see me!"<p>

"No, I didn't. I said I'd accompany him here to supervise, that's all."

"Don't lie to your dad, I know you missed having some quality time with me. Can't say this will be an awesome bonding moment, but-

"Corazon, I'm not ten anymore."

"No need to act so grumpy, Law. It's fine, it's fine."

Marco watched the scene with amusement. Corazon petted Law's hair in fondness reminiscent of Whitebeard, and Law's cheeks reddened in a matter of second before he was scowling, and the argument " if it could be called that " continued.

"They're adorable," Ace commented.

Marco chuckled. "I never imagined they were father and son."

"Corazon adopted Law long ago. He was part of the military in another country, did you know?" Ace nodded at Marco's bewildered look.

"Couldn't believe either when I first heard. They met in a complicated situation when Corazon came here on a mission, but I guess they bonded and he decided to adopt Law."

"And how did he end up as a teacher here?"

"I don't know. Law never shared that, and I didn't pry. They entered together not long after I got here, though, so if I've been here for around eight years, they must have been here for around seven."

They were doing warm-ups together at Corazon's demand, and Marco faltered in the middle of a jumping jacks.

"Eight years?" He asked, stopping to catch his breath.

"Yeah. Didn't you know?" Ace also stopped, but he slumped on the ground with a heavy sigh. "It's a long story."

Marco didn't say anything, merely sitting beside Ace on the ground.

"You two better not slack off," Corazon suddenly said to them. "You need to warm up more, and you too Ace, if you're going to help him."

"Give us a break, can't you? For a little while."

Corazon rolled his eyes, his seriousness a contrast with the clown-like makeup on his face. "In the meanwhile, I need you to show me your transformation, Marco."

Marco took a deep breath and got up. He had decided to help, so it was about time he stopped fearing showing his powers in front of others.

In a matter of seconds, he felt the comfort of his flames consume him as they licked his body and changed it â€" from his behind, a long tail grew until it touched the ground near his feet, which were the next to change and become talons; then his arms became softer, lighter, and wings appeared in their place. Breathing became easier, all of a sudden, and all knots of tension he felt disappeared.

Marco glanced at the others with a smile, which grew when he took in their astounded looks.

Corazon whistled. "You're really a phoenix. That's rare."

"It's amazing," Ace said, and Law nodded in agreement.

"It's pretty much an animal half-transformation," Corazon mused to himself. "If we strengthen your arm musculature, it should compensate somehow in your wings, but it's also better to get used to carrying things on your back like this. You're good at flying?"

"I am, by myself."

"Nah, don't worry about that. You'll get better with training and this place-" he waved around the room. It was spacious and had good illumination, but besides the space they were occupying, it was full of boxes and old teaching material. "-will be free whenever you need it. Nobody really comes here."

With that, Corazon dragged Law with him out the room with words to continue warming up while they searched for different things for him to try carrying, as a start.

"Does he know about the plan?" Marco asked Ace, still on the ground.

Ace didn't make a move to get up either. "Not exactly, but he's smarter than he looks like. I'm sure he figured parts out, so we ask him for help sometimes."

Silence enveloped them for a while, but it wasn't the uncomfortable kind. Marco's mind had started to wander when Ace sighed deeply, sat up, and removed a small wooden box from his shorts pocket. Marco raised an eyebrow at the clear scratch on its surface before familiarity stroke him and he remembered seeing it for the first time when Ace struggled with Salome.

"This," Ace murmured. He opened the box, revealing a cracked red sake cup inside. "Was my brother's."

Oh.

"Another brother?" Marco asked, but the answer was obvious.

Ace nodded. "We were adopted by Luffy's grandfather when we were really young, but we only considered each other brothers after exchanging sake cups â€" a silly child thing. Between the three of us, only Luffy and I had Alices, so whenever an official from Alice Academy came to visit us, he was told to stay away. Of course he didn't listen, Sabo was stubborn."

"Like you."

A small smile grew on Ace's lips. "Like me. Like Luffy too. Anyway, our grandpa refused to let us come here until we were older â€" he wanted to train us, let us see more of the world, or something â€" but the Academy doesn't accept no for an answer. Then Akainu came, but still, our grandpa's decision was no. We tried moving out, but one day our house caught fire without reason." Ace looked at his hands, smile turning bitter. "The fire escaped to the rest of the village, I was blamed for it and Sabo was at home when our house collapsed. Luffy found our sake cups broken in half, but this one survived. Ironic."

"So Saboâ€|?" Marco's voice was so soft it was close to a whisper.

"I don't know. The Academy keeps a record of every student's family, and I found a street name next to Sabo's name, b-but-" Ace swallowed. "There's a cemetery there. I-I mean, there are also some houses down that street, so Iâ€| I don't know what to think. The last time I saw him, Sabo was being pulled inside an ambulance, and he was bad so I-"

Ace cut himself off as his voice broke, and covered his face. He took a deep breath.

"I don't know. Luffy doesn't know about the address, but he still holds to the belief Sabo is well."

"If you win the best student prize-"

"Yeah, I was thinking about checking everywhere on that street. Find some clues, anything would suffice."

"I guess I understand the feeling," Marco muttered. He had gotten to see Haruta and Vista asleep in the hospital, but Pops had been connected to so many different tubes Marco couldn't even begin to count, and his situation wasn't as hopeful. If he could only have the chance to check on them, even if they moved around a lot with Pops's lifestyle, it would be enough for now.

"What do you mean?"

Marco found the words escaped his mouth easier than he expected. They told his story from when he was only the aberration child in a village on a small island, to when it was destroyed by a tsunami and

only he survived. From when Pops found him and offered Marco a chance to live, to the years in his company and the siblings he got, and finally to the accident from more than a month ago.

His chest felt heavy by the end, but there was also a lightness in the rest of his body, a relief in his mind that someone knew what happened at last, and he didn't know what to feel.

Ace didn't offer any words of consolation, but Marco was glad for that "they both knew they'd just be empty words without solid proof, even if positive thinking was important. Instead, Ace put a hand on the back of one of Marco's and squeezed, to which Marco turned his around and reveled in the warmth he felt.

"Uncertainty weighs heavy in the mind," Marco murmured.

"It does," Ace agreed. "But we have a plan. If there's time we can try snooping around the files and see if we find anything on our families. Heh, that's a nice thought, finding out they're fine and screwing with Akainu's life in return."

"It sure is," Marco chuckled.

"You're officially invited to our meetings on Saturdays, by the way."

"Every Saturday?"

"Most of them."

"The past one had a meeting too?"

"I'm not sure, actually. Maybe."

Marco rolled his eyes. "What were you going to do if my Alice wasn't useful? Let me hear the secret talk anyway?"

Ace snorted. "Of course not. I'd have probably left with you with the excuse of visiting other places." He shrugged. "It's pretty much why I agreed with helping Hancock meet Luffy. He knows about everything, but he's not discreet, so it's better to leave him out the loop until it's near the time. He's the backup, in case everything goes wrong."

Marco tried imagining Luffy's Alice being used in combat, but didn't come up with anything. His elasticity, on the other hand, could be useful. "He'd catch attention, but I imagine he could get us out easily."

"In a second, even if we'd end up a bit sore."

"Then I hope the backup to get out won't be needed," Marco deadpanned, earning a laugh from Ace.

"Come on, let's continue warming up before Corazon gets back and starts complaining."

Ace grinned the same bright smile from two days ago, but this time Marco's heart palpitated in a strange way, one that left him all warm inside but also cold at the stomach.

It was gone after a minute, and as Corazon and Law returned with full cardboard boxes " Marco could swear he saw a one-eyed teddy bear beside a bunch of bananas - he decided it wasn't important.

* * *

><p>Time passed quickly after that. Summer vacation ended in the blink of an eye, and then Marco was back to studying, training with Corazon, and visiting Central Town with Ace and the others to finish the details of the plan. Meanwhile, Izo roped him and Luffy into continuing to help with the scenario for the musical the Somatic class was practicing for the Alice Festival this year.<p>

Alice festival " another thing Marco was surprised to discover existed in the Academy. It was an event that lasted a few days in which all ability classes created something to present. There was a Refreshments day, a Vending Day, and a Performance day. The first and last days were the focus of Marco's class, and he found their classroom full of people entering and going out all the time " he was very happy he was only helping with things for the background; the ones who were going to act or participate in their Horror House were much busier.

Right now, though, he had escaped from the Elementary school building only to be caught by Thatch when he neared the dormitories.

"Nami, Ace, and Izo are having a study session in Law's room," Thatch explained as he dragged Marco. "Let's go."

Thus, Marco found himself sitting on the ground of an unamused Law's bedroom surrounded by books and papers. Law had big headphones on his head that made it possible for him to ignore their existence from his writing desk, and Nami mouthed words from the biology resume in her hands, face growing more annoyed as it turned harder to concentrate with Izo's and Thatch's argument over a physics question.

Ace seemed to be the only one dealing well with the session, if his concentrated expression was any indication.

"I don't get why we need to study all this. It's useless. Why do I need to learn about plant evolution? I won't use it to anything I decide to work with in the future," Nami complained, and Marco had to nod in agreement.

Her comment was enough to get Izo's and Thatch's attention, and even Ace looked up from his history book with a sigh. "If only teachers cared about that."

"It's not the teachers who decide that, though." Izo crossed his arms. "But by our age we could have classes adjusted to our area of choice, and there could easily be an option for those with no idea. Everyone would be happier."

"It's ridiculous how Alice Academy is such a strange school, but still follows the curriculum of normal ones."

"Which means we all need to be studying, preferably in silence," Law piped up. He was eyeing them with discontentment.

"Come on, Law. It's your turn to share your room," Nami chided.

"That's for when we're planning, training, or, I don't know, not studying. Can't you be quieter?"

"Law wants to become a doctor," Ace whispered to Marco. "He'd be very successful with his Alice, but we're prohibited of ever using it in occasions people might suspect something, so Law has to start from zero and get into a good college."

Marco hummed in understanding.

"Alright, no need to be so grumpy." Nami nudged Law with a foot, earning a grumble. "Oh come on. You're always complaining! Relax for a bit, you have so much time."

"Not that much," Law rebuked. "Besides, the exams are next week and the Alice Festival is the one after, and unlike you, I still have some things to conclude my part for the technical ability presentation and less time than I wan-"

Marco stiffened at the same time there was a gasp and a chair rattling as it hit the ground.

"There's less than one week to finish the preparations?!"

"Fuck, I forgot about them. I had an important role too, damn it."

"My group is going to kill me, ugh."

Law rose an eyebrow, unimpressed. "See?"

"Shut up," Ace groaned, and ran a hand through his hair. "I need to memorize a few lines for our showâ€¦"

"Don't we have that banner to finish?" Marco turned to Izo, who nodded serious.

"And some of the background scenario, and part of the special effects," Izo counted with a frown. "You were all so caught up in studies I let myself go with your flow and forgot. We should've asked to contribute less this year."

Nami looked at the clock. "One more hour, then we'll go to our classes to finish stuff."

There was a general agreement before everyone continued on from where they had stopped, including Izo and Thatch's argument, though in softer tones. Law sighed exasperated.

"You have a stupid look on your face."

Marco looked at Ace, who had an eyebrow up. "I don't."

"You do. Amused?"

"I guess." Marco let his eyes wander to the people in this room with him - his friends. It was a not-so-unexpected surprise to discover

Thatch and Izo were Ace's and Nami's friends, and it was nice to see them included in these studying sessions " and some hang-outs on weekends, to shop in Central Town or watch a movie in a common room. They bonded much better than Marco could have ever hoped for when he entered the academy, and even if he had to keep the plan a secret from Izo and Thatch, he still felt they were close. He'd worry about explaining it after it was all over.

"I'm mostly happy."

"Happy?"

"Yeah."

Ace looked at him, confused, and Marco smiled.

Ace was a special case in his new circle of friends. The most unexpected one, and the one he found he had the most fun beside " they clicked together quickly after their bumpy start.

"Through most of my life, I never lived in the same place for long. I didn't mind, it was Pops's preferred lifestyle, and I chose to go with him. I got some siblings along the way, and even if we're all adopted, we got along well, and for the longest time it was enough. Here, though, it's different. I don't like being in this school, but you guys... Friendship with people who don't have any reason to stay near me? Never really had this. It's gives me a nice feeling," Marco finished with a chuckled, then felt his cheeks burn in embarrassment. "That was really cheesy, wasn't it?"

"It was" Ace said with a soft voice. He was giving Marco a strange stare, but not a bad judging type, then he straightened and looked away. "It's-it's nice, you're right," Ace stuttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "Alice Academy may be like a prison at times, but it also brings good things."

"Thankfully," Marco said.

"At least," Ace corrected with a wink, and then he was back to normal and Marco had to wonder if he imagined the change. "Before I forget, Franky said his preparations should be done right on time for the last day of the festival."

"Right."

"Hey, you two, do you know how to do this one?"

Marco's attention was brought back to the others and their study session. They had to get ready for the 'attack', but before that, there was exams week to worry about.

* * *

><p>Exams week was definitely the most stressing week Marco had had ever since he entered the academy. The students were mixed to avoid cheating, and he ended up in classroom C without anyone he knew nearby. This fact by itself wasn't bad because he enjoyed the peace and silence, but that also meant Marco had too much time to overthink.<p>

Getting distracted before the exams wasn't the smartest thing he could have done. Thankfully, after a while, Marco caught the rhythm needed to complete all the questions in time and be able to check his answers, and from then on, they flowed without other inconveniences until the last one.

With the end of exams week, it was time for the Alice Festival. Marco had imagined a lot how the festival would be, but nothing he pictured compared to the real thing.

Two stages and uncountable stalls were set up between the buildings of Middle and High school, and somehow they were even more colorful and attention-catching than the ones from Central Town.

The first day was the Refreshment Day, which, like its name suggested, was directed to making cafes and drink stations. It was for this day that he, Izo and Luffy had been designing that " and many other " banners, and it was satisfying to see them exposed and serving their purpose. There were also games focused on Alice using, and the Special class did a great job creating a labyrinth with an Arabic theme " it was called 'RPG Aladdin and the Magic Lamp' - that had challenges in the form of the class' students using their powers. Marco and Ace spent almost an hour trying to find their way out.

The second day was for those who wanted to buy things " Vendor's Day. The technical class was the most successful one, full of new machinery, objects and even food, unique and useful in their own way.

The last day was Marco's personal favorite. Aimed towards presentations, the Performance day included music shows, Latent class' Hunted House, and Marco's class musical. He was glad to watch from afar, and was extremely amused when 'guests' appeared and Ace showed up in a 'star' costume.

"Damn." Marco gritted his teeth.

"Hey, it's okay. We're on the ground and safe," Nami said. She groaned when she got up, but waved away Marco's concern as just a bumpy landing and that she'd just be a bit sore the next day. He watched her walk some meters away and lean against a tree before she pressed a few buttons on her watch and started talking.

He turned to check on Ace and found him lying on the ground with a dazed look on his face as he stared at the starry sky.

"Ace?" Marco kneeled by him.

"I'm fine," Ace mumbled. "It's justâ€¦ We did it."

He sat up slowly and put out his hand, and then it was engulfed in flames, bright and warm. His eyes were distant, and his mouth formed words Marco couldn't understand.

In an impulse, Marco got near and held Ace's hand. The last of his phoenix half-transformation disappeared, but in its place, Marco let his healing fire wind up and surround Ace's. The mix of colors was as mesmerizing as the first time.

"Our powers fit well together," Marco commented in a soft voice.

"They do."

"Don't forget we're in this together. It's not the same as in the past." It was clear for the both of them Marco meant a time before Alice Academy "one filled with hardships and tragedy leading them here.

Ace smiled. "I won't."

Marco pulled Ace up, and they separated their hands as the fires vanquished.

"You two ready to go?" Nami asked a bit to the side. The big watch on her wrist had a small light turned, its brightness lighting up her face in the dark refuge behind some trees.

"Yup."

With the plan fulfilled, they decided to enjoy the rest of the Alice Festival. The fourth and last day was comprised of the After Party "true to it's name, it was an enormous party to which everyone on the academy's grounds were invited to have fun and dance. It was held near the stage from the third day, but this time a big bonfire light up the area from the center of the dancefloor with the help of small spotlights that changed colors carefully arranged.

When they arrived, after changing to formal clothes, people were dancing and singing excitedly. The mood was cheery and contagious, and soon they were meeting up with Luffy, Robin and Franky and heading to the dancefloor.

"I can't believe it's over," Marco said when he and Ace decided to have a break. He took a sip from a berry juice a waiter offered him and sighed, content.

"It's almost over," Ace corrected. "We have the documents, but we need to read over everything

The song playing ended, but instead of continuing, no other song came. Instead, the lights turned to the stage, where someone spoke on a microphone, thanking everyone for their presence. Behind them, the directors of elementary, middle and high school stood, and word was passed to them after a moment.

Ace's eyes narrowed when it was Akainu's time. He fidgeted, but he didn't say anything.

"We should enjoy ourselves tonight." Marco put a hand on Ace's shoulder. "Let's leave worrying about the rest of the plan for tomorrow."

"I guess you're right."

Music began playing again, but this time it was a soft and beautiful one, so different from the previous ones. The circles of people, friends, and companions formed throughout the night slowly separated as most walked away from the dancing zone only for some to come back

in pairs. The constant murmurs of voices quieted as the lights changed to soft blue and green and the dancing resumed, creating an almost ethereal picture. Marco felt something in his chest tighten.

"What's this?" The question fell from his lips in a soft whisper.

Beside him, Ace had fallen quiet, his previous restless fidgeting gone, and when Marco glanced at him, Ace's eyes looked glazed as he stared at the dancing people.

"The Last Dance," Ace murmured. The flickering flames from the bonfire were reflected in his eyes, making it seem alight with a bright shine, and Marco found himself unable to turn away. "It's annoying how final that name sounds. It's like it's saying 'If you don't dance now, you won't get another chance,'."

"No second chances," Marco said with a slight crease in his brow, and Ace nodded. When it was worded that way, the dance seemed heavy, loaded with feelings not present in any former one.

The tightening in his chest worsened.

"It's stupid. There's one every year, but people still get so excited for it like it'll actually be the last one. So stupid."

Yet, Ace's eyes seemed almost yearning, contradicting his words.

Just a dance. The last one.

"Do you wanna dance?" Marco didn't know when he moved, but one of his hands found one of Ace's, and he squeezed it.

Ace started and looked at him, confusion clear in his expression and fire still strong in his eyes, and Marco had to swallow at the fuzzy stir in his stomach.

"What?"

"Dance."

"Dan-what? Are you serious?"

"Yes." Marco smiled as Ace gaped at him, stunned, before his cheeks darkened with a blush. It was an endearing look, and Marco found himself wishing to see it more often. "Let's go."

He pulled Ace forward until they were at the edge of the dancing zone, and as Marco turned to him, as he saw an undecipherable but bright glint in Ace's eyes from so close, he felt the strange feeling in the pit of his stomach grow. Damn, this wasn't the time to be inexplicably nervous.

In a sudden burst of sheer need to get closer, Marco moved to put his hands on Ace's hips, only for them to collide with Ace's own trying to do the same. It took them a few awkward seconds to reach an agreement, but then Ace's arms were on his shoulders, fingers intertwined behind his neck, while Marco's hands were resting on

Ace's hips, and an overwhelming feeling of rightness surrounded Marco.

A stray thought entered his mind as they started moving to the slow beat of the music, one foot here, the other there, turning around with no hurry. The people around them never seemed more insignificant than then, and wasn't that a little scary to realize?

Nonetheless, that realization wasn't enough to take Marco from his dancing daze because, for now, their proximity, the feel of Ace in his arms was enough.

Marco could kiss him.

Marco started, tripping on his own feet when the hurtful pressure of a chair hitting his hip made itself present. Ace's hands on his shoulders was the only thing that kept him from stumbling to the ground

"Whoa, are you okay?"

The concern in Ace's eyes made Marco swallow thickly. A strong feeling crawled up his stomach until it reached his throat in a lump.

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"No worries."

Marco's neck felt like it was burning in the place Ace's hands had been.

"Marco." Ace's voice was so low it could be a whisper, but Marco had no problem in hearing him. "Thanks for the dance."

"Hmm. I liked it."

A silence surrounded them, one that was heavy and full of something never present before. Marco's hand itched to reach for Ace's, and he felt his resolve to stop this strange action disappearing as the seconds ticked by.

Ace opened his mouth only to close it and lick his lips. It was a nervous habit Marco had seen before, so there was no reason for it to make his stomach twist. He found himself thoroughly lost, with his throat dry and a growing urge to move closer.

Marco liked Ace, didn't he? It was the only logical explanation.

Well, damn.

"Ace!"

"Ace!"

Marco's voice was overlaid by a shout, and they both turned to where it came in confusion. Waving at them, Luffy grinned before his mouth moved, forming inaudible words from the distance, and he looked at someone behind him. It became apparent it was Nami when she moved to

the side and her bright orange hair became apparent, but besides giving a quick wave and a wink at them, she dragged Luffy to a table far and didn't look like she was coming to them anytime soon.

Ace sighed, pulling Marco's attention back, before rubbing the back of his neck. He seemed distracted, looking in the direction Nami and Luffy went.

"I should go there," he murmured.

"Oh." Marco tried to avoid frowning, reminded of his newfound need to be closer to Ace. He searched Ace's face for any sign showing he wanted the same, but Ace's eyes were turned elsewhere, not once looking back at him, and he felt his hopes dwindle.

He was in no place to hold Ace from going after his friends, and maybe that was for the best. There was something in the air, something Marco didn't recognize, so what if he had overstepped a boundary?

And to think he had been about to make himself look stupid by saying something nonsensical.

"Okay," he finished, forcing a small smile onto his face. "See you tomorrow."

"Hn. See ya."

Without a glance back, Ace went in Luffy and Nami's direction, and Marco was left watching his back wondering what had happened.

* * *

><p>"What happened?! Are you kidding me?!"<p>

"When you promised you'd be quiet, I thought you actually meant it."

"Sorry, sorry. It's justâ€¦ Damn, you really don't know?"

"If I did, we wouldn't be having this conversation at all."

"Hey, that hurts, Marco. Am I not your friend? Your bestie? You need to tell me stuff!"

Marco glared at Thatch, but had to squint his eyes because of the mid-morning sun that shined on his back. Because of its angle, Thatch's form seemed to radiate light, and coupled with the pout he was giving Marco, it made him look true in his worry. The glint in his eyes was easy for Marco to spot by now, and it was enough to shatter the innocent image he knew Thatch was trying to create.

"Really?" Marco deadpanned. He sighed, feeling a headache coming. Damn his lack of sleep.

"Alright, I get it. No more jokes." Thatch rolled his eyes, but still leaned against the tree trunk, making it easier to look at him. "So you had no idea about the Last Dance superstition?"

"Nothing besides the 'it's your last chance to dance, so go on, use it well' or something."

"It'sâ€¦ Well, it's complicated. I don't know when it started, but ever since I entered this school, every year, when it reached about a month before the Alice Festival, rumors would start without fail about the Last Dance and couples forming. I guess they're not that obvious, but many people believe in that superstition and talk about it. According to the legend, any pair that dances it is fated to fall in love with each other-

Marco straightened, eyes sharpening at the sound of the word 'love'.

He and Aceâ€¦ in love?

"-and there's a 40% accuracy."

Marco blinked slowly. "There's an accuracy percentage?"

"Some people with technical Alices did the math who knows how long ago."

"Huh," Marco said, and they fell into silence.

The people that participated together in the Last Dance were bound to end up together in the romantic way. As a couple.

Marco had danced with Ace.

Marco covered his mouth as heat crawled up his face. Thatch's definitely not quiet snigger to the side only made it worse, to his dismay, and he turned to the side in an attempt to hide it.

"Come on, what are you going to do now?"

What, indeed. Marco thumped his head on the trunk of the tree behind him, but as expected, no answer came to him. "I don't know."

It all made sense now, though. Why everyone gave that dance so much attention, why the whole atmosphere seemed to change, why Ace's expression was so strange in that moment.

"Oh, damn." Marco ran a hand down his face before glaring into the distance. There were a few people in the surrounding grass, the ones responsible for the soft talking murmur he heard, and he wished one of their conversations had the answers he needed. "I should've done something back then."

"Yeah, you should have."

"Not helping, Thatch. You could've said something before, you know."

"Sorry about that." Thatch gave him an awkward chuckle and a sheepish smile. "I got so used to having you around that I forgot you enrolled this year. Everyone talks about it when it gets closer, though, so you could have heard someone."

"But I didn't."

Marco looked up at the sky through the leaves at the tree top, and sighed. If everyone knew about that superstition, then Ace did too - his look was more than enough to confirm that. He knew, and yet he accepted dancing with Marco.

Or did he? Marco had pulled him to the dancefloor before he got an actual answer, but the lack of protest should be enough to take as a good signal. Ace wasn't one to do things he didn't want as long as there was nothing forcing him to, and Marco didn't do that.

Marco bit his lip, staring unseeingly at the grass as his heart's pace quickened. He was thinking too much, but he couldn't get this wrong. That had been a good signal, right?

"Stop with that look." Thatch's nudge on his shoulder brought Marco's attention back to him. "You lost your chance, but what's holding you back now? It's a weekend, you have today and the whole day of tomorrow to get Ace by himself and act."

"But what if-"

"You're kidding me, right?" Thatch raised an eyebrow, and Marco looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean? I didn't even finish."

"'What if he doesn't like me', is what you were going to say, isn't it?" Thatch crossed his arms, and leaned against the tree trunk with a smug expression. "It's pretty obvious if you think about the dance."

It was a positive signal.

Marco chuckled, slightly embarrassed at the sheer relief he felt. "No, I wanted to ask 'what if I screw up when I confess and he gets the wrong idea?'. I'm new at this, you know."

"...Seriously?"

"Yeah. So, mister I-know-what-you're-going-to-say, what's your advice? How does one confess?"

"Shut it. I don't know. I don't have much experience either." Thatch trailed off, and Marco chuckled at the embarrassed blush that grew in his face. He wasn't lying, but it was nice to see Thatch struggle for once. "I guess you just say what's on your mind. Try not to be cheesy, and be direct, I suppose. You'll both be busier with the new semester soon, but what the hell, it's your chance! Go after it."

Marco laughed. "Alright. Thanks for the positive talk, Thatch."

"You're welcome."

* * *

><p>Marco's chance came sooner than he expected. That very night, he

brought a book with him to one of the benches in front of the dormitories. There was a sort of garden there, as well as a lamppost, and even with a soft fall breeze, it felt like the perfect place to let himself relax. He needed to think over Thatch's words and decide what he was going to do " and, maybe more importantly, how he would do it.<p>

Marco wished he could say he had experience, but with his old lifestyle, it was hard to get attached to someone enough to the point where he developed strong feelings for them. Simple friendships, camaraderie " he knew how to deal with that. Confessing he was in love with Ace wasn't that hard, but doing it to Ace himself? Now there came the challenge. Marco felt butterflies fluttering in his stomach at the mere thought of it.

He let his eyes skim over the words in his book, but the description of the new island the Whitebeard pirates had docked in went over his head. It was a good book, but also just a way to fool himself into believing he had his decision under control and that he wasn't dwelling on panicking thoughts.

It was understandable, then, that Marco didn't notice the blatant noise of running feet approaching, so when he looked to the side at the last second and saw Ace's face centimeters away, he startled and dropped his book.

"Marco" Ace panted, hands on his knees and shoulders sagging at each heavy exhale.

"A-Ace," Marco stuttered, then cleared his throat. His heart was beating hard inside his chest, and it seemed like it was going to burst out any moment. "What" what are you-

"I need" your help."

"What?"

Ace chuckled and dropped to his knees and into a sitting position leaning against the bench. "What is it?"

"Right." Marco resisted the urge to offer for Ace to say what he needed first. He sat on the ground beside Ace and took a deep breath. "About the Last Dance"

"Ah, that. Don't-" Ace cut himself and looked to the side. "Don't worry about it. You didn't know about the superstition, right? It's okay. Just forget it."

"Forget it? What-no!" Marco growled when Ace opened his mouth. "Can you just listen first?"

"I already am." Ace shrugged, and despite seeming nonchalant, there was a certain tension in his shoulders. Marco played with the last button of his shirt " did Ace already suspect what he was going to say?

"Look, I-I didn't know about the superstition, that's true. I feel bad I didn't, but-" He raised a hand to stop Ace when he opened his mouth. "But it's because it'd have been the perfect moment to confess. If you want to forget it, it's your decision, but I won't. I

like you, Ace. I don't know since when, but I've fallen hard. If you-if you want to forget, then I won't hold it against you. I just needed you to know."

Marco sighed, expecting the silence that followed. He wished he could look elsewhere, but he forced himself to maintain Ace's gaze as he waited for an answer, even if his heart felt like it was being squeezed as the seconds ticked by and an array of emotions went through Ace's eyes, but no words came from his mouth.

"Fuck, Marco, Iâ€¦!"

"Ace, you don't have to say much, really."

"No, that's not- I mean- Fuck." Ace ran a hand through his hair and looked up, murmuring something to himself. Marco tried reassuring him it was fine once again, but was cut off when Ace held Marco's face on his hands. "I meant to say-" Ace swallowed thickly, "-that I like you too. A lot. I just-I'm not good with words, okay? A-and I'm just so fucking happy right now I could kiss you for hours."

"Ah," Marco said, then he broke their stare by leaning forward and capturing Ace's lips on his own.

Warmth filled Marco's body, and he pulled Ace closer at the same time hands snaked around his neck. Their inexperience was obvious, but as the kiss deepened and their tongues slid against each other, sending shivers down Marco's spine, it didn't matter. Ace was kissing him back with fervor enough to take his breath away, and it felt amazing.

They were both panting when they separated, and Ace's flushed face never looked more tempting than then.

"I really wanna go forward with that idea of kissing for hours. But I need to say what I came here for." Ace sighed. "It's definitely not as good as your

Marco chuckled. He felt so light. "What is it?"

"The material is ready. Robin finished organizing everything the documents, and Nami sneaked inside the main building to put them in the stack to copy and distribute," Ace said with a grin. "They do that at the first Monday of every month, and guess what day it is tomorrow?"

"But isn't anyone going to notice what those documents are about?"

"Nah. It's a machine that does that boring work â€" I think Franky was part of the team that built it years ago. Anyway." Ace shook his head. "Nami told me to get you to Law's room. We're going over them one less time and then we'll celebrate."

Marco linked his hands with Ace and gave them a squeeze. He smile at the adorable blush that appeared on his face. "Guess we have a lot of things to celebrate tonight."

"You know they're gonna go crazy, right?"

"Wasn't expecting anything less."

* * *

><p>In the next morning, it was chaos.<p>

Marco opened his eyes with difficulty, sleep clinging to them, at a strange cacophony of voices outside his window and an insistent knocking on his door. He didn't bother changing out of his pajamas nor washing his face, and opened the door with a yawn.

"Marco, it worked!"

Marco blinked, then tried rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "Ace? What worked?"

"Whoa, you're really tired. Sorry." Ace gazed at him in sympathy. "But can't you hear? People are revolting out there. They want explanations and the staff is giving them answers."

It clicked inside Marco's mind at the same time Ace gave him a wide grin, the same one Marco had become so fond of and that radiated brightness. "They're believing us," he breathed.

"Yes, they are!" Ace laughed merrily and pulled Marco into a hug. "We did it."

Marco closed his arms around Ace and tightened his hold, a sigh of relief escaping his lips. Then they were both laughing to the point it was hard to stay on their feet, so Marco slid down the door frame pulling Ace with him. This time, it was Ace that pulled him into a kiss - much longer and more intense despite the risk of someone walking by and seeing them.

Marco's lips tingled when they separated, and his tongue hurt a bit from a bad calculated little bite. It was an inexperienced kiss, but it felt amazing nonetheless.

"You taste awful." Ace wrinkled his nose.

Marco rolled his eyes. "I wonder why."

They went inside the room after that so Marco could change, then headed outside to see the progression. There were a bunch of students talking loudly, one of them waving a paper Marco recognized as the one he had seen last night at Law's room. Two teachers were to the side talking between themselves and sneaking glances at the frustrated students,

"Robin is sure this won't be linked to us, right?"

"Yeah." Ace nodded. "I bet Akainu will suspect us as soon as he hears about this, but he can't do anything. There's his signature in some of the papers - that's hard to fake, even with all the crazy stuff some Alices do."

"Then it's wait and hope he has to face the consequence of his action. At least the students won't just stand by while something like his 'training' happens."

Satisfied, they turned around and went to the dining hall to eat breakfast. Marco couldn't remember a time ever since he entered Alice Academy in which he felt as relaxed as now - and he knew Ace's hand intertwined with his had most to do with it.

"You know," Marco started. "Next week the result to the exams will be released."

Ace let out a puff of breath, the start of a distant look forming on his eyes. "Yeahâ€¦"

"Ace." Marco stopped walking and squeezed Ace's hand. "In case I win, I promise I'll search for you brother."

Ace blinked at him a few times, then grinned. "And I'll do the same in case I do. It'll be nice to meet your family."

Marco chuckled. "I'm sure you'll get along with them. And if neither of us winds then we'll find a way to sneak out."

"Wow, I didn't expect to hear this from you," Ace said, one eyebrow raised in mock surprise. "Becoming a rebel, Marco?"

"And whose fault is it?"

Ace laughed, and Marco grinned at the charming way the skin near his eyes wrinkled. It was then that he realized he wouldn't change his time for Ace with anything, and suddenly the idea of staying in Alice Academy until graduation didn't seem all that bad. He'd think about the years of observation, though - as Ace said, he had plenty of rebel thoughts swirling inside his mind

But for now, this was all he needed.

End
file.